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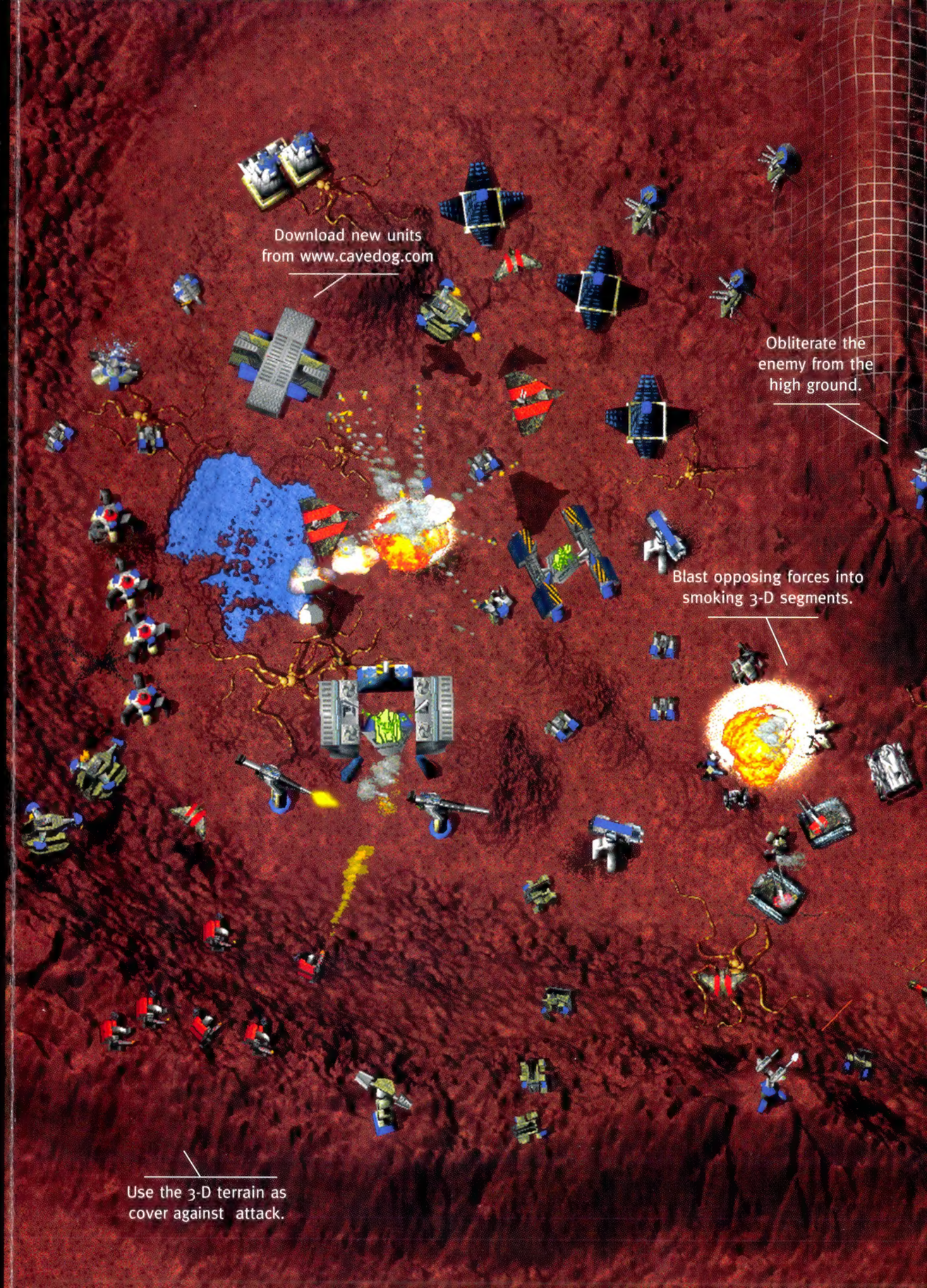
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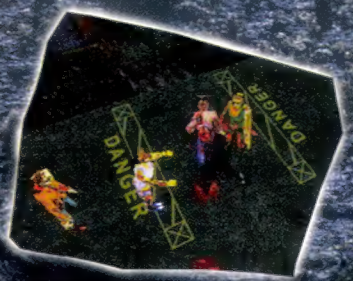

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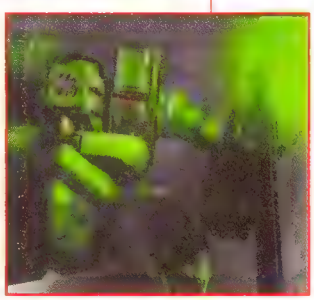

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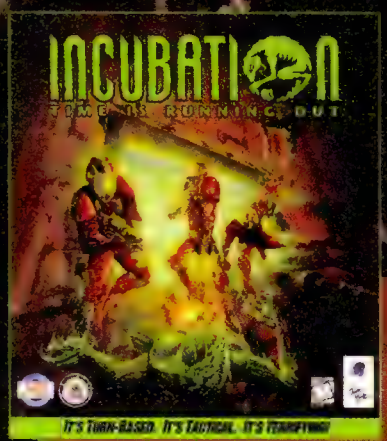

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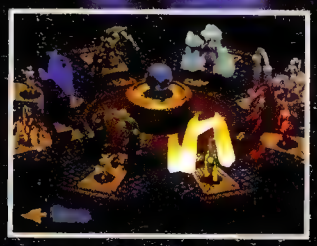

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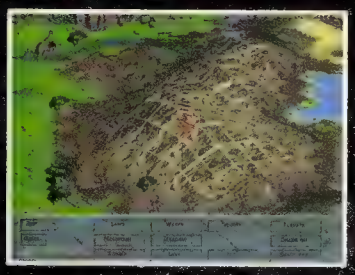

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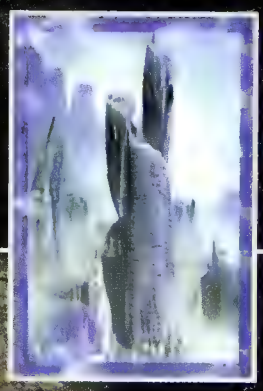

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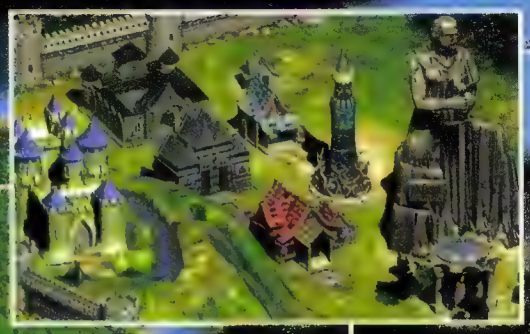

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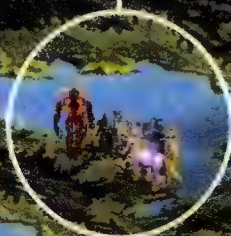

Reviewing the ratings

In light of the volume of mail we receive discussing review ratings, perhaps it's time to discuss reviewers and reviews and how we hope you interpret a review as an evaluation of a product.

The role of the reviewer is to serve the reader and not be an advocate for a product or company. The reviewer's duty is to examine thoroughly, evaluate and report on as many features of a piece of software as is possible given constraints that range from deadlines to word-count limits. There are no review templates, feature checklists to tick off or formulas for developing an opinion or calculating a rating – it's all based on that reviewer's opinion, taking into account their own baggage, preconceptions, and prejudices.

After the reviewer has submitted the review, the editorial staff begins the evaluation process to determine whether or not the review is acceptable for print. Beyond grammar and style issues, we do not exert any control over the opinions and ratings of our writers. If we feel the text doesn't match the rating, we ask the author to clarify their position in the text or suggest a new rating. If some sort of compromise cannot be reached with the reviewer, we are forced to either reject the review and reassign it to another writer or run it as is and stand behind it 100%.

(For the record, in the last three years, we've rejected two reviews. One for being absurdly positive – the writer waffled so much on the rating it was clear he wasn't confident in it himself – and another where it was clear the reviewer was mismatched to the product.)

The main problem with this approach is there exists the possibility that reviews written by different people will not express opinions consistent with other reviews. One solution to this dilemma, and it's used by some magazines, is to give the editorial staff the option to alter the reviewer's recommended rating in order to maintain some form of editorial consistency from review-to-review.

Unfortunately, exerting this sort of dictatorial control opens us up to a few potential problems, the most obvious being a written review that does not match the rating. While the editors have a better sense of the "big picture" of gaming and one product's relationship to others, we're not omniscient (no, really). We can't assume we're as well-informed and qualified to give a final evaluation about any specific product as the reviewer who has spent 30, 40, 50, 100 hours of time with it.

The big issue that seems to get lost when discussing reviews and ratings is that matching the rating with the written text is not an exact science, which is why it's crucial you consider both components when discussing a review. A group of people online took issue with last month's *Age of Empires* review [*CGS+ 85, pg. 98*], focusing entirely on the rating.

In this particular case, the text of the review explicitly details what many feel are the main weaknesses of *Age of Empires;* however, for the reviewer, those weaknesses did not detract enough from *his* enjoyment of the game to knock it down a notch on the rating system. However, by providing this caveat to the reader, saying the "unit AI needs work," he has, in effect, done his duty by warning the reader who is extremely sensitive about how that particular feature is implemented. Unfortunately, this hasn't managed quell the hordes who think the rating is erroneous.

It is important to remember that the star rating should not be considered the most important component of a review – the actual written text puts the rating in context; once removed, it loses any meaning. The rating provides a shorthand, quick-and-dirty evaluation, but shouldn't be used by anyone as the sole determination of a product's quality, or lack thereof.

In the spirit of this, and in order to address the problems of ambiguity inherent in any rating system, we're no longer assigning global meanings to the ratings. A five-star review doesn't mean a game is a "a transcendent gaming experience," an "instant classic" or garners our "highest recommendation." Instead, the text of the article will serve as the definition and justification for that rating as it applies to that game. Without the context the text provides, the rating becomes irrelevant, which is as it should be.

In the end, we will also continue to allow our reviewers the freedom to have the final say on their reviews. We also welcome reader rebuttals, and will continue to print alternative viewpoints in our letters section. While we can all probably agree this system is flawed, we think it's superior to the alternatives.

–Steve Bauman, Editor

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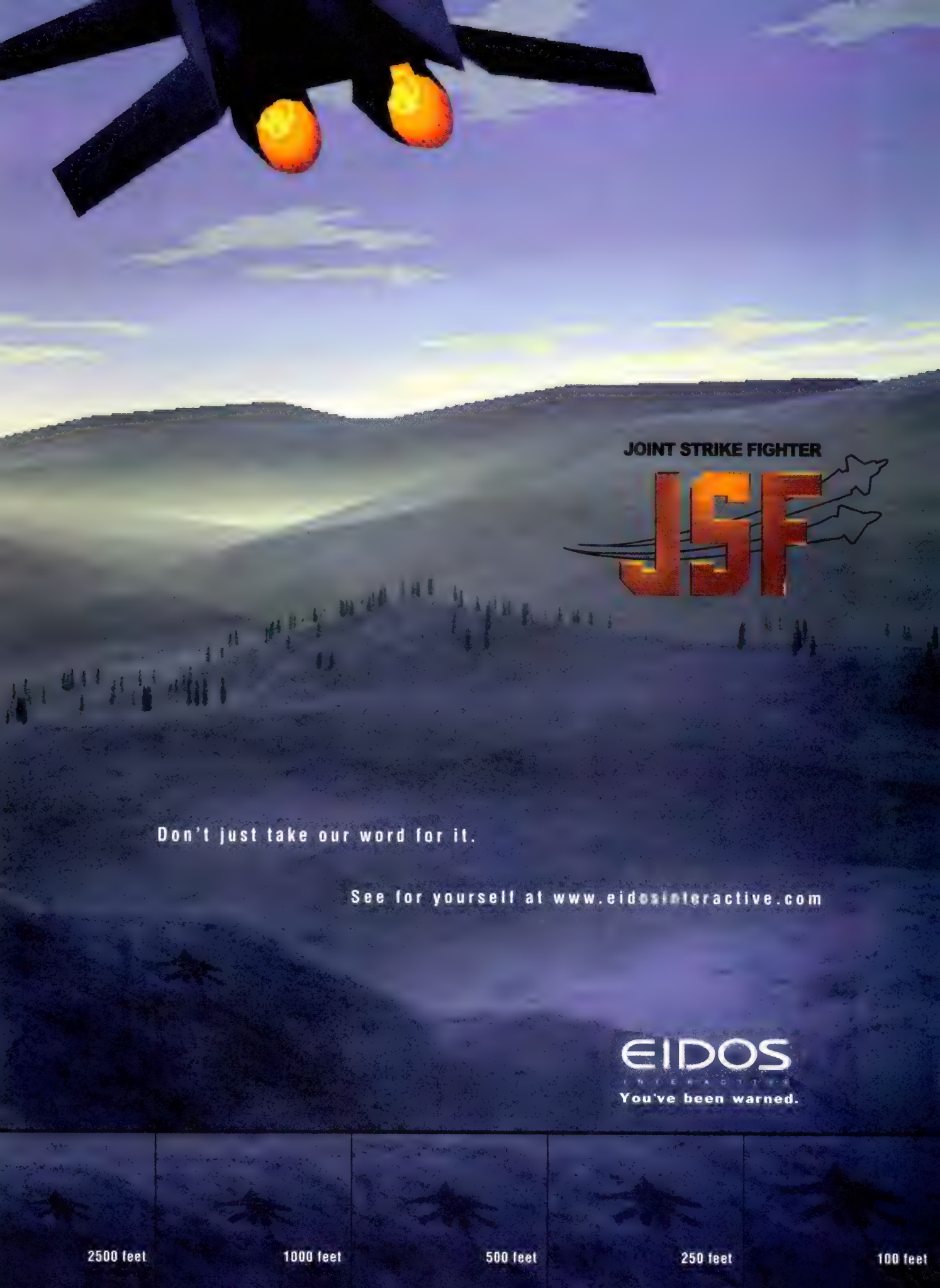
"The first time an engine moves this fast and is just as detailed at 100 feet as 100,000 feet."

PC Gamer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1000 feet
500 feet
250 feet
100 feet

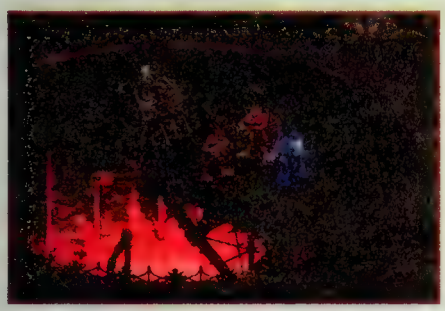
Thoughts turn to summer

SSI's strategy for 98 and beyond

ALWAYS PLANNING AHEAD, SSI HAS announced their line-up for 1998. In addition to the already-previewed *Soldiers at War* and *Panzer Commander*, you can expect several new strategy and sim titles. Note that many of these are early in development and that names, release dates, and even basic designs may change significantly in the coming months.

Mage's Legacy

Due late in the Spring, *Mage's Legacy* will mix portions of the common real-time strategy game with some strong RPG elements (somewhat like *Diablo* mixed action and RPG). You'll command a group of characters through a series of mission-based quests.



The latest Warhammer game, Chaos Gate, may be the best-looking of the bunch

Characters can be equipped from over 300 weapon and armor types and can wield many spells. Questing will be the emphasis; while there will be little character interaction with NPCs and only some character development, combat isn't the goal, but a means to the quests' ends.

Ancient Conquest series

Formerly known as *Admiral – Ancient Ships*, this Megamedia-developed real-time game has been picked up by SSI and split into a series. The first title, *Clash of the Argonauts*, is due late in the Spring and lets you battle for the ancient mythical waters of the Mediterranean. As Greece you can fight the Romans, Egyptians, and Phonecians, and come up against such figures as Medusa, the Cyclops, or the Roc. The second title, *Straits of Hercules*, will ship late in the Summer.

Sword of Heroes

Expected for late Summer, *Sword of Heroes* is a turn-based fantasy strategy game along the lines of *Heroes of Might and Magic*. You get to take on one of six hero types, with each hero having different characteristics and bonuses, a unique city look, and cultural themes (a Mayan cleric, Medieval Islamic explorer, Norse ranger, etc.). Players form an army and take it along with their hero to explore the map (in the current version, all in a single stack); along the way you may encounter creatures or enemies, wield magic, or enter into combat, which can be resolved tactically.

Warhammer 40,000: Chaos Gate

The newest generation game engine for SSI's line of Games Workshop conversions, *Chaos Gate* is a turn-based, tactical-level game likened to *X-COM* and *Incubation*. Players can take squads of up to 12 Space Marines through an 18 scenario campaign against the Chaos Marines, or through their own missions they whip together with the included mission editor. SSI didn't have any gameplay to show at this stage, but the graphics look to be the best yet in their *Warhammer* line. Due in the Fall.

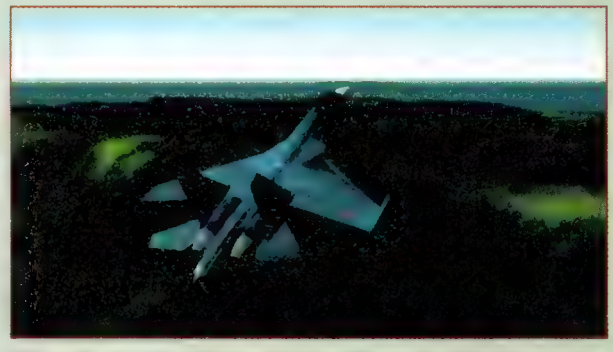
Su-27 2.0

While the original was known for its hard-core realism, SSI is hoping that the sequel will appeal to beginners as well as hard-core gamers; the realism of the original will be there, but beginner modes, a complete tutorial system, and a more accessible interface should appeal to the rest of us. Another title without gameplay to show, the sample pictures and videos look tremendous; to achieve the look the game will require 3D acceleration and will support MMX and AGP. Currently listed as a late summer..

Other news

3D Naval Battles: Battlewagons: developed by Divide by Zero, this game features an all-new engine for recreating World War I and II battleship conflicts. It will support 3D acceleration, but probably won't require it, unlike the previously previewed *Panzer Commander*, which now not only supports 3D cards but requires one. To further expand their presence in the simulation market, SSI will be forming what they are calling the Digital Combat Series; while details are vague, it sounds like they are moving towards the Holy Grail of simulations, a linked battlefield system. On the wargame side, the next title in the *Living Battlefield Series* (after *Panzer General II*) will be *People's General*. Set in the modern day, it posits a militant China taking on the powers of the Pacific Rim.

The biggest news, however, is the signing of Larry Bond's *Harpoon*[4], a title that won't ship until 1999. The game will use the newest rule-set for the miniatures gaming system (hence the skip in numbering from the old *Harpoon II*). Larry Bond is taking an "active interest" in the project, and SSI's own Carl Norman will be the producer (Norman was deeply involved with the development of the computer versions of *Harpoon I* and *II*); Crusaders Studios will be the developer. The game will be 3D and will require a 3D card. *–Scott Udell*



With version 2.0, Su-27 is ready to shed its ugly duckling image

Mage's Legacy: Is it an RPG? Is it a real-time strategy game? Only it's parents know for sure

MicroProse's new licences to thrill

FRESH FROM THEIR ACQUISITION BY GT Interactive, MicroProse held an editor's day at their San Francisco offices to officially announce some titles previously shown behind closed doors to select members of the press at the E3 show last summer.

Star Trek: The Next Generation Birth of the Federation

Just as *Star Wars* is receiving its strategic level treatment in Lucasarts' *Star Wars Rebellion*, MicroProse will be offering a similar perspective on *Star Trek*. *Star Trek: The Next Generation: Birth of the Federation* [*whew!*] gives the player control of the Federation, the Klingons, the Ferengi, the Romulans, or the Cardassians from their early days immediately after the discovery of interstellar travel through the development of the advanced technologies of the *Star Trek* universe. Each race has its own strengths, weaknesses, and victory conditions. Special events and computer-controlled alien races will pop up to give the game the unexpected twists that characterized the TV series. Since many Trekkers aren't necessarily strategy game fans, user options will allow for shorter, less-involved games on the one hand, and longer, drawn-out epic games for harder-core gamers.

Birth of a Federation is being built from the ground up to support multiple human players through LANs, Internet connection, hot seat play, and even play-by-email [*what isn't nowadays?*]. The developers readily admit their admiration for Empire Interactive's *Stars*, which inspired their multiplayer model. Players simultaneously take their turns; once all the turns are submitted, they're processed and the results are returned to the players. Combat can either be resolved by the computer, or general orders can be issued to ships, which will then fight accordingly in a non-interactive 3D rendered view of the battle.

Because of licensing issues, the game won't feature any familiar characters. Other details are still being hammered out, like how to model financial resources in a universe without money. Get engaged next summer.

In Birth of the Federation, combat can be reviewed after-the-fact with VCR control over the 3D rendered space battle

The Birth of the Federation interface sports the distinctive bright and streamlined look its source material

This brand new 1956 model flying saucer cockpit can be yours if you buy X-COM: Interceptor

Starship Troopers

Robert Heinlein's sci-fi classic about the psychology of warfare was a prototype for the "mech" genre: the troopers' mechanized battle suits transformed them into superhuman combat machines. Although Paul Verhoeven's movie version has abandoned this concept due to cost (the budget was swallowed up by the computer animation for the bugs), MicroProse's game of the same name puts the player in battle armor in the middle of a 3D game played from a chase perspective; think *Tomb Raider* without the curves. While in the command ship, the player's character moves around sans armor, where he can plan combat drops once he's achieved a high enough rank.

MicroProse is using their own engine for *Starship Troopers*, since they need to have swarms of bugs attacking simultaneously. They also needed an engine suited to a variety of environment types: spaceship interiors, bug tunnels, buildings, and wide open landscapes are all a part of the game. Since none of the existing engines were up to the task, they've built their own. Also, this is no "one man against the world" game: in addition to planning the strategic elements of a mission, the player eventually gains control over his entire squad. For players not interested in the bigger picture, promotions can be declined and the campaign will progress from the perspective of a simple grunt.

Enlist and don your battle armor next spring.

Expect to see far more than just five bugs onscreen at once in Starship Troopers

X-COM: Interceptor

You've fought *X-COM*'s aliens on earth, undersea, and even in a another dimension. Where to now? Outer space, of course. This prequel to the previous games in the series puts the player in charge of defending the mining efforts to gather the necessary resources for building Mega-Primus, the city in *X-COM: Apocalypse*. *Interceptor* will feature personnel management, scientific research, and base construction as per the previous games, but now funding comes in the form of a cut of the production from mining facilities. Also, the aliens will play the game by the same rules as you, dividing their available resources between research and production. And, most importantly, combat takes place in deep space.

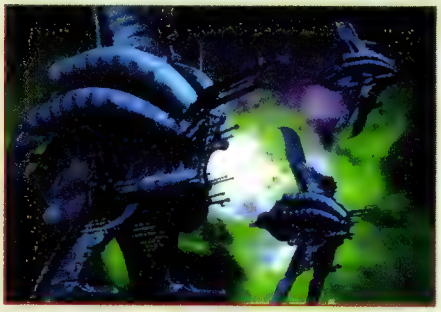
Although the combat engine looks like your typical *Wing Commander* clone, the interface and artwork have the distinctive 50s retro/art-deco look. Spacecraft cockpits look vaguely reminiscent of Cadillac dashboards and the alien ships and bases have the odd organic look they had in *Apocalypse*. *Interceptor*'s strong strategic gameplay should also set it apart from other space combat clones. The player constructs his own base, which floats around in the void and may very well be the site of combat if the aliens get aggressive enough. Players also manage their own mining production, building it up and defending it from the attacks. In standard *X-COM* fashion, new weapons and ship types will be uncovered as the game progresses. This will also be the first *X-COM* title to include multiplayer support. *–Tom Chick*

Babylon 5

"The wheel turns, does it not, Ambassador?"

FIRST LOOK "IT WAS A NEW AGE. IT was the end of history. It was the year everything changed. The year is 2261. The place: Babylon 5."

Finally – Valanice of Daventry and Roger Wilco meet Bugs and Daffy…well, John Sheridan and G'Kar, actually. Sierra and Warner Bros. have recently developed a partnership through which they will launch a product line based upon the television series, *Babylon 5*. The titles are the first progeny of a possible long-term relationship between Sierra and Warner.



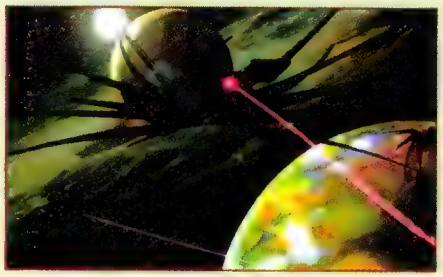
Minbari war cruisers on patrol

There will a trio of products, the first two of which may already be in the produce section of your local Egghead. The inaugural release, bearing the somewhat unwieldy title of *The Official Guide to J. Michael Straczynski's Babylon 5*, falls into the realm of multimedia reference, and is a heavily researched, intensively documented journey into the center of the world of *Babylon 5*. Here, even the hardiest Babs (!) can pick up an new snippet or two of info. Next there is an enhanced CD with music by Christopher Franke, *Babylon 5*'s composer. Sierra Oakhurst composer Victor Crews is looking forward to working with Franke on this ground breaking project. The cuts will include music from the series, as well as original material created specifically for the final product, a space combat sim.

That game is under the guardian wing of series creator J. Michael Straczynski, who is working closely with the developers to see that the product adheres to the tone and look of the series. It is a real-time 3D space combat game that will allow players to fly and fight their favorite *Babylon 5* ships in a detailed simulation of the series universe. Strategy and tactical elements are included free of charge. Narn and Vorlon geeks can expect to drool all the way to Fall 1998. *–Cindy Yans*

Babylon 5 • Sierra • Windows 95

Centauri warships surround a Narn



Shadow ships attack at Io

BRIEFS: Voodoo 2–3Dfx Interactive says its second generation accelerator will be available sometime in the first quarter of 1998. The company says expect boards to be priced under $300. Diamond Multimedia already plans a new Monster card based on the Voodoo 2 chipset, which is three times more powerful than Voodoo Graphics… **Wing Commander flies solo**–Origin has pulled multiplayer support from *Wing Commander Prophecy*. The company did guarantee a multiplayer *Wing Commander* in the future… **Zone hits a milestone**–Microsoft says its Internet Gaming Zone has garnered more than 500,000 members, making it the largest gaming site on the Internet…

Dark Side of the Moon

It's been too long, Pink Floyd

FIRST LOOK "I GET VERY UPSET when they talk about mapping Bruce Willis' face onto a polygon," says Lee Sheldon, designer of South Peak Interactive's *Dark Side of the Moon* and very much a proponent of the human side of computer entertainment. Although we won't see Bruce Willis in this outer space adventure, we will again see live actors doing what they can to bring true life to the small screen.

You are Jake Wright, a young man whose uncle had a mine claim on the planet Cepheus-6 at a mining colony owned by the Brave Hope Mining Corporation. A videotaped Last Will and Testament entices you to visit the planet where you suspect that your uncle disappeared under mysterious circumstances (not that the videotape says, "If you are watching this, then I must have disappeared under mysterious circumstances…" but there is indication enough). The gameworld flavor hints of the Old West, with sci-fi overtones. On this planet, there is an indigenous group of people called Cepheids who have been virtually enslaved by the mining company. Sheldon views this as a bit of social commentary. The game is a voyage of discovery about both the character himself and about the planet. What is it about this place that has caused so many deaths through the years? A standard mystery/adventure, the game is full of "dramatic obstacles" that will hopefully be interwoven with the storyline.

Cepheus-6's own yellow brick road

In this title (unlike its predecessor, *Temüjin*), the backgrounds are almost completely rendered. They are developed in SGI, and the artists also utilize a render farm of over 200 HP workstations. Art Director Paul Graham has designed the world from scratch – right from design maps to the fully realized space colony complete with special effects. "With seven artists having almost complete creative freedom," says Graham, "It is a challenge to make a homogenous environment. We have a huge database of textures that helps a lot." Look for the full lunar eclipse next spring. *–Cindy Yans*

Dark Side of the Moon • SouthPeak Interactive • Windows 95

The Cepheids are revolting

VIRUS

THE GAME

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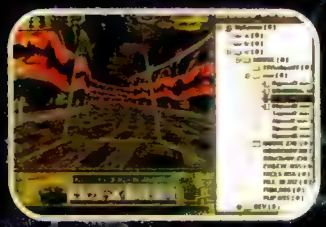
Protect your Windows™ folder at all costs. If your graphic driver is infected, your screen display will corrupt. And if your mouse driver is hit, you might lose control altogether. Frightening, isn't it?

Just remember: It's only a game...



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will panic
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You will pull it off
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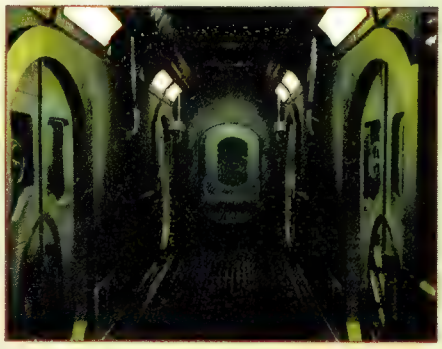
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea

Video Reality turns Nemo's quarters to dollars

FIRST LOOK Using Version 2 of its revolutionary Video Reality engine, SouthPeak Interactive is blending rendered sets with gorgeously crafted, fully constructed scenery to bring us a modern sequel to Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. This product was initially designed at Sanctuary Woods in conjunction with Orbital Studios by Gary Winnick, who brought us the late but still great *Maniac Mansion*. Former Sanctuary Woods writer/designer Lee Sheldon (*The Riddle of Master Lu*) brought it with him to SouthPeak where it continues to evolve.

Picture giant squid in the control room windows

This first-person adventure is set in a near future where world hunger is becoming more of a major problem than ever. You are part of a research team that has been surveying sites on the sea floor that have the potential for undersea farming. As your group is pondering the possibility of Frosted Mini-Algae, you stumble upon what you are amazed to discover is the submarine Nautilus, which most had thought to be the fictional creation of a crazed mind. You find yourself and the rest of the crew stuck there as you are being chased by everyone under the sun – apparently, there is some pretty valuable technology on board. You travel through the Bermuda Triangle, the Lost Island (complete with drawbridge into the mouth of a giant skull), and undergo many other perils while running around trying to save your collective rear from the "pirates."



Transitions from real sets into rendered corridors is a quite a challenge for the art department

Sheldon is excited to work with SouthPeak's technology. "I don't like interactive movies but I think full motion video brings human beings to games... and I don't think we should lose that. This engine allows us to integrate the 'cut scene' mode with the interactive mode in a way that I'm sure will be interesting to the player." Todd Cook, Art Director for the rendered portion of the game, is confident that there will be seamless transitions between the rendered and the "real" rooms. We haven't seen seamless yet, but so far, SouthPeak is gaining an edge on success. Look for it in Fall, 1998. *–Cindy Yans*

20,000 Leagues Under the Sea: The Adventure Continues • SouthPeak Interactive • Windows 95

More Fallout–Interplay has confirmed that there will be a sequel to the recently released *Fallout*. Details are scarce, but expect it to be available for Christmas season of 1998... **Starcraft stays home**–Blizzard says that the Internet multiplayer component Starcraft will be available exclusively over the company's battle.net service... **Eidos gets Mucky Foot**–Eidos has signed a publishing deal with Mucky Foot, a new development company founded by three former Bullfrog members, including the project leaders of *Syndicate Wars* and *Creation*... **In the driver's seat** – Papyrus has signed NASCAR driver Bobby Labonte to serve as its corporate spokesperson...■

Air Warrior III

Old game gets a new tan on Pacific isles

FIRST LOOK ONE OF THE GRANDDADDIES of online gaming, *Air Warrior* is about to enter it's third generation in the form of *Air Warrior III*. While the previous version, *Air Warrior II*, added an extensive selection of single player options (with some 150 off-line missions, making it a full "boxed" game in its own right), this newest version's primary claims to fame are support for 3D acceleration and six new campaigns, including four in the Pacific.

3D effects, via Microsoft's Direct3D, include texture-mapped aircraft and terrain, and a more realistic-looking sky with fog and sunbursts (finally, a decent reason for using lens flare!). The terrain is more detailed, with new visible features like farms and villages and with slightly more rugged-looking mountains (no more pyramids). The underlying landscapes, however, won't have as much relief detail as some other sims due to the need to keep the terrain datasets compatible between those who have 3D support and those who don't.

Corsairs looking for trouble...

Texturing brings the Hawaiian islands alive

The six new campaigns include such oft-ignored situations as the battle for Malta and one from the perspective of the Imperial Japanese *Army* Air Force (many games focus on the exploit of the Navy's Air Force and its infamous Zero). Altogether the game, which includes all the missions from *Air Warrior II*, will have over 450 individual missions. Interactive Magic and Kesmai are particularly happy about the new Pacific Theatre campaigns, and tell us four new planes have been added to flesh out gameplay in this region: the Nakajima Ki-43 Hayabusa "Oscar," the Aichi D3A1 and D3A2 "Val," the Nakajima B5N "Kate," and the Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero - Sen "Zeke."

Other promised features include improved AI in the stand-alone modes, new combat and full screen views, and new historical on-line missions that will allow up to 120 pilots to participate in huge recreations of actual air battles. The game, which is due out in the first quarter of 1998, will sell for $49.95, but I-Magic says that owners of *Air Warrior II* will be able to upgrade for about $20. *–Scott Udell*

Air Warrior III • Interactive Magic • Windows 95

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MYTH
THE FALLEN LORDS

Flying over Korea; note that while mist and fog exist, they're not used to obscure objects in the distance but are instead placed realistically

Joint Strike Fighter

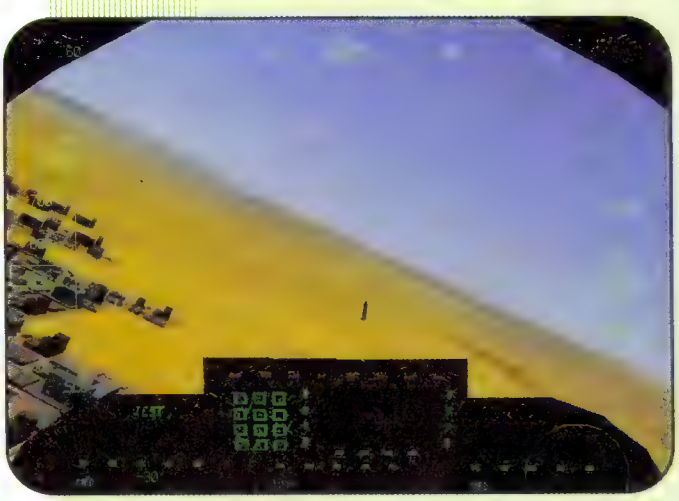
Looking to the future of air power

Eidos Interactive • Windows 95

It wasn't that long ago that flight sim makers had a slew of new high-tech planes to model; X- and Y-versions being considered by the military were rich ground for gaming. Now, though, with the drawdown in the military and the successful completion of several of design competitions (no chance for another F-23 sim...), the pickings are becoming mighty slim. Even the previous "new jewel," the F-22, is becoming old hat, and by year's end will have been the focus of no less than four titles. What's a designer to do? Why, look to the United States' one remaining combat aircraft development program. Eidos and Norway-based designer Innerloop have done just that in their upcoming *Joint Strike Fighter*.

The JSF program (see sidebar) has two different prototypes currently under development. The X-32 and X-35 are, at this point, just designs, models, and test frames; neither has flown let alone been chosen as "the" strike plane of the future. Instead of deciding on one or the other (and potentially choosing the loser, as in *Jetfighter II*), Innerloop is going to give gamers both planes to fly in combat; in fact, you may see both models in the skies at the same time, along with a stable of current and near-future aircraft like the F-16, F-22, MiG-29, Su-27, and more. Eidos' Eric Adams says there will be other flyable planes and helicopters, accessible via a cheat, but the focus—and most attention to detail—will revolve around the two JSF prototypes.

While neither plane has flown, Innerloop says that they believe their flight models will be very close to the actual performance of each. The designers have communicated extensively with both manufacturers and the Air Force and have had a lot of input from Bill Sweetman, a well known aviation author who has followed the JSF program and its progenitors for years. Changes to the aircraft's designs could invalidate some of the modeling, but short of breaking basic rules of aerodynamics in the models no one will know how close they've come until the actual planes fly.

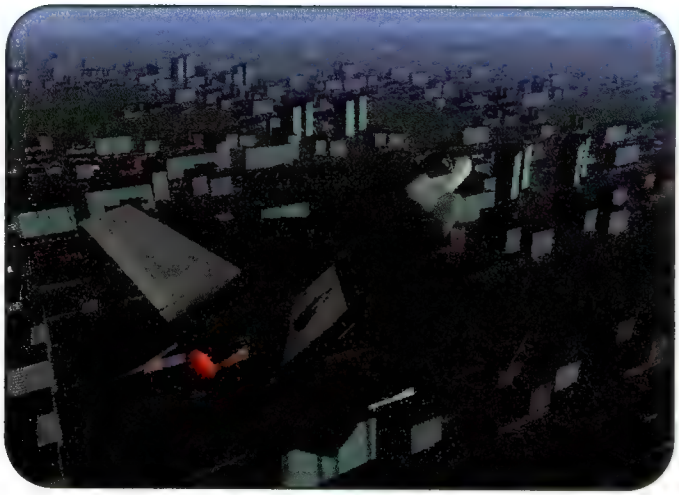


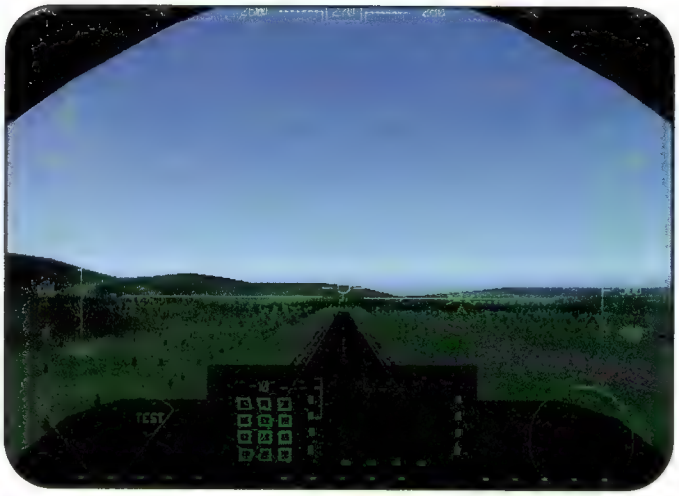
A room with a view

While the physics of a flight model are critical to getting the "feel" right in a sim, visual acuity is no less important, and Innerloop is putting a huge amount of effort into their graphics engine. The game runs in 16 bit color at resolutions up to basically whatever your card can handle (at resolutions of 1024x768 and higher it becomes unplayable on even the current high-end machines). Polygons are all Gouraud shaded and texture- and MIP-mapped; as you get closer to objects or terrain polygon count grows, so detail increases realistically. Although the hundreds of trees you see at low-level flight did, in the pre-beta, show a bit of visual "popping," Adams says this has been eliminated in later builds, and the infinitely rendered horizon means that you don't have major terrain features popping up on the screen like you do on most sims. Hazing and fogging effects exist, but only to provide realism (not to cover up things in the distance).

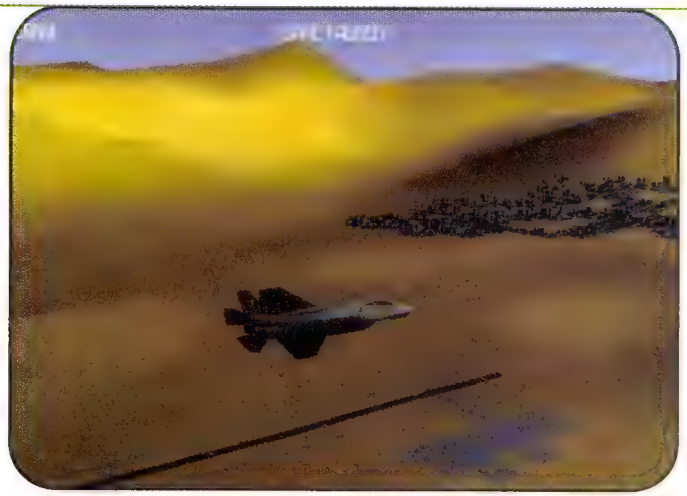
And all this is at a high frame rate *without* 3D acceleration. Innerloop was apparently worried that 3D acceleration would add little to the game, and might even detract from it (for instance, they already know that they'll have to cut down the amount of texture information they use to be able to fit within the normal 3D card's texture memory), but they have gone ahead and added 3Dfx support anyway (if for marketing reasons alone). The development version we have does not have 3D support; on a Pentium II at 266 MHz it ran quite smoothly at 640x480 with all the detail turned on, but on a 133MHZ Pentium at 512x 384 at full detail (and 16 bit color), frame rate was noticeably reduced. This, however, is with the game in beta form and not yet fully optimized, so the final may see improvements; according to Adams they're getting 20 frames per second on a 200MHZ Pentium without acceleration, and 30-35 FPS with a 3Dfx card.

The usual assortment of views exists: cockpit-less, in the cockpit, and various outside views (missile views, enemy views, etc). The virtual cockpit mode provides fully accessible controls—click on a button and it works—so as you twist your view about you can access controls without reaching for the keyboard or switching to a static-angle view. In addition to the expected heads-up display (HUD) modes, *Joint Strike Fighter* simulates some technology just in testing: real-life pilots will soon have the computing power to display simulated views of the terrain onto their HUDs or in their helmet-mounted display systems, giving them a near-perfect view of the terrain even at night or in bad weather (for the game this means they're simulating a simulation of reality!). Also, Adams says that the game will "include a fully functional MFD [multifunction display] that allows total customization of the plane controls and automatic systems."

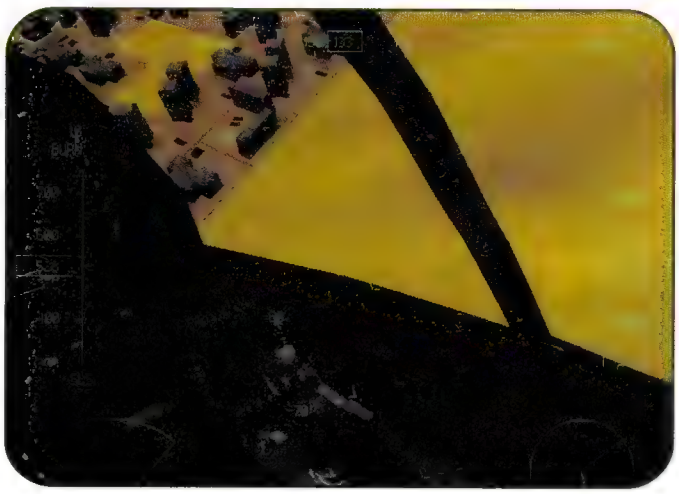




(left) The 50 basic building shapes combine to make some pretty complex pitches. (right) Helmet-mounted display (HMD) technology gives aircraft like the F-22 and Joint Strike Fighter a real edge. In this example, the system displays the runway-surface grid that is obscured by the body of the plane.



One of the campaigns



There's a virtual cockpit for each archetype of the plane

Lands of conflict

While you can jump into quick action missions or head-to-head games, the core of *Joint Strike Fighter* is its four campaigns, from relatively easy Afghanistan through Columbia, Korea, and on into the heavily defended Kola Peninsula (in northeast Russia—go where the Navy dreamed of going but never did). Backgrounds range from the plausible (North Korea finally explodes) to the improbably Hollywood (take out the drug lords' secret drug facility while fighting their F-16s), but should appeal to a range of gamers. Length and difficulty will be ramped up; the Afghan campaign, for example, features low-quality airborne opponents, weakly defended ground sites, and should only take three to five hours to complete, while the Kola Peninsula campaign puts you up against top-of-the line "opposing force" aircraft in one of the most heavily defended airspaces in the world—a challenge that will take 20 or more hours to overcome.

While Eidos describes the campaigns as fully dynamic, this is not entirely accurate. While certainly not a series of linear missions, targets on the battlefield and in airspace start out "canned"; each campaign has a fixed number of airborne threats and primary and secondary ground targets. While the mission count might be canned, Adams says air and convoy targets change and that "radar and AAA sites toggle on and off (to simulation maintenance downtime)." One aspect that *is* fully flexible is the order you decide to take these targets on; one route may be more direct but also more highly defended. While you can choose multiple targets for one mission (thereby saving time), will you have enough ammo and fuel left to kill them all?

Your choices do have an effect on the flow of the campaign; eliminate all the defenses on and around a forward air base, for example, and you "capture" the base for your own use (in real life planes don't take territory, but as ground battle is not represented this concession to playability was made), which can put you in good stead for launching further attacks. Because the ground battle isn't modeled, the enemy can't recapture bases; instead, you are fighting against a clock as each campaign will have a time limit (usually some number of days) in which you must destroy all the primary targets. Missions flown will take time, there will be some automatic down-time between missions (pilot fatigue is not modeled more explicitly than this). Another limitation in the campaigns is the number of planes available to you; if you have enough shot out from under you it'll be game over, and in dangerous places like Russia this could prove quite a headache to careless hotshots.

Each campaign consists of some 2.4 million square miles of accurate terrain (with altitude and texture information taken from satel-

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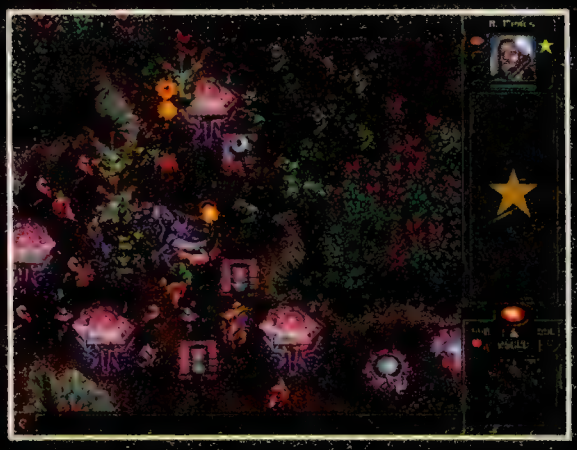

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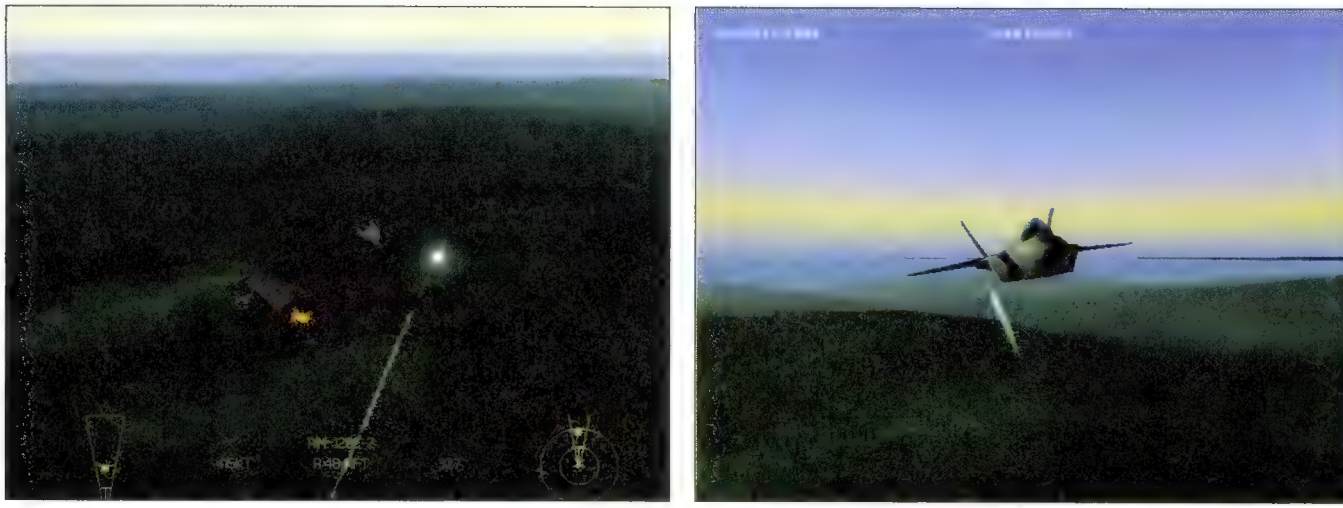

Two samples of a missile firing over temperate terrain: on the left is a 3Dfx shot and on the right a shot from the standard version of the game. Can you tell the difference?

lite data); beyond the bounds of each campaign area more terrain is modeled with less accuracy so you'll never get an "edge of world" effect (this also allows them to continue their infinite horizon modeling out beyond the play area). Geographical features, both natural and man-made, have been placed accurately, and in some cases are polygonal, not flat texture maps slapped over the terrain grid. Cities are particularly detailed, built up from a selection of over 50 building types.

While you can't fight campaigns multiplayer, you can use the maps for your human furball-fests. Eidos says the game will support up to eight players in either co-operative or deathmatch dogfights.

The last little bit

addition to the gameplay Eidos and Innerloop plan some "extras" that should help expand the *Joint Strike Fighter* experience. Chief amongst these is a series of informational animations by Digital Animation; not cut scenes, these instead act like manufacturer product videos only a lot more informative and often better looking. Nice in-game touches help round out the feel of "being there." Before a mission you have to set your waypoints based on the threats along the way as well as on those at the target, and you must remember to balance your weapons load between stealth and potential enemy activity. If a mission ends badly (*i.e.*, with you blasting out of your cockpit in your ejection seat), things aren't necessarily over; you control your descent via parachute and once on the ground may even have to evade the enemy on foot (armed with an automatic pistol) for a time. Touches like this give a game a lot of potential; if they merge with everything else into a smooth whole we could end up with quite a sim, but only some test flights of the final (simulation of prototype planes) will tell for certain.

–Scott Udell

The Joint Strike Fighter Program

While most small combat aircraft are called "fighters," for a number of them pounding targets on the ground is as big a job as tussling with other craft in the air; such missions are referred to as "strike" or "attack" missions, and were a critical part of the Allied success in Operation Desert Storm. One of the darlings of the sim community, the F-16, spent more time delivering ordnance on ground targets than it did shooting down Iraqi aircraft (supposedly A-10s achieved a higher air-to-air record when one pilot executed the "Warthog stomp" on a helicopter)—perhaps an indication of the importance of strike capabilities. The Joint Strike Fighter program (JSF, a combination of the former JAST—Joint Advanced Strike Technology—program and other projects), the military's last major combat aircraft development program of the century, aims to provide a one-stop replacement for all the services' strike fighter needs. The winner will eventually replace F-16s, F-18s, Harriers and more in one single, massive production program—with over 3,000 airframes planned it will be the largest modern combat aircraft production run ever.

Currently, two different designs are competing for the JSF contract: Boeing's X-32 and Lockheed Martin's X-35. While both planes are designed to be an all-in-one *program*, each service may have variants specific to their needs (especially the Marine Corps and Royal Navy, which need a STOVL—short take-off/vertical landing—replacement for the Harrier; this variant will not be modeled in *Joint Strike Fighter*). Both designs are built around a single engine; the X-32 can be distinguished by its large, under-the-nose intake reminiscent of the A-7, while the X-35 looks something like a single-engined F-22.

Aside from incorporating the stealth technology developed for the F-22, the JSF will feature newer stealth capabilities, especially in the visual area; because the plane will often operate closer to the ground, it will be important to protect it against the "Mark I Eyeball" sensor that equips many man-portable SAM launchers. Stealth is also improved by limiting emissions from the plane, be they heat, communications, or radar. Passive datalinks will be used heavily to let JSF aircraft on a mission keep their electronic heads down while still giving pilots an idea of the big picture. These datalinks will be modeled in *Joint Strike Fighter*; information for these datalinks will come through stealth-friendly antenna arrays built right into the aircraft skin.

New weapons (included in the game) the plane will carry include the precision GPS-guided, 900kg JDAM (Joint Direct Attack Munition), the AGM-154 JSOW (Joint Stand-Off Weapon), and the Lockheed WCMD (Wind-Corrected Munitions Dispenser). Even the counter-measures have gone higher-tech with the inclusion of a laser that can "dazzle" or overload the seeker on a threatening missile.

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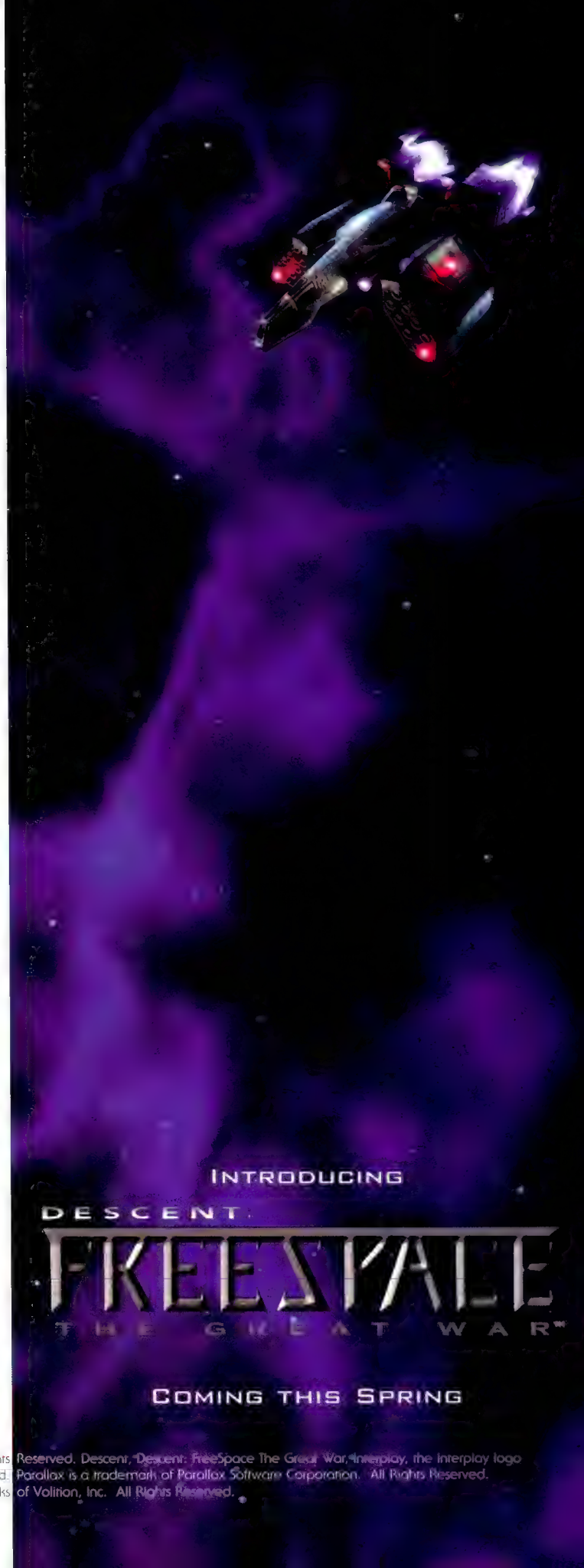

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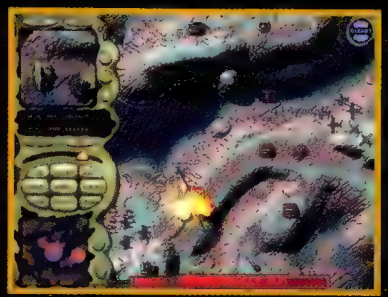

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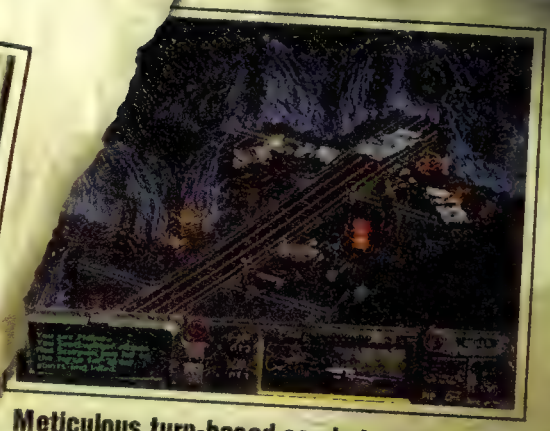

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"the innocent are dying"

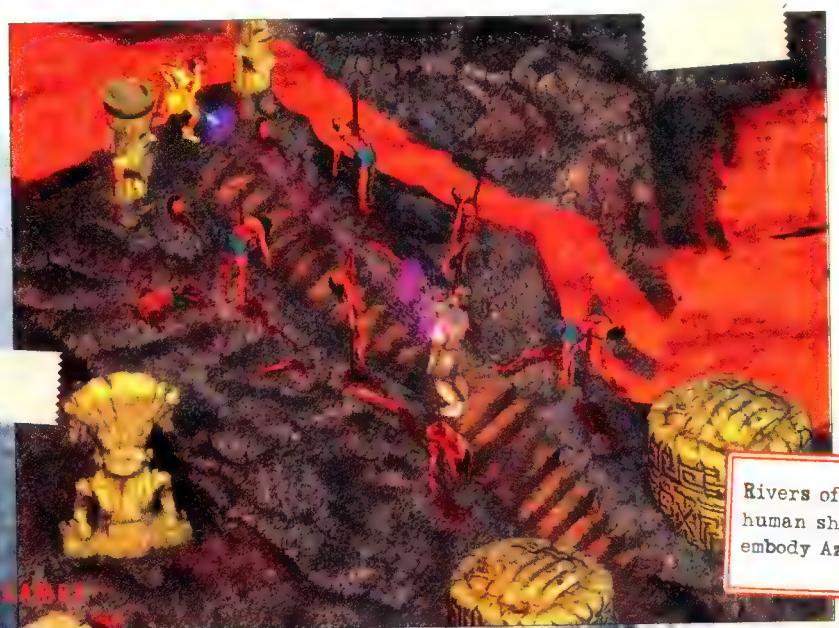
SANITARIUM

Chronomaster was on store shelves, and as Ron Perlman, Brent Spiner and Lolita Davidovitch faded into a purple sunset, restless creative brains at DreamForge Intertainment were getting itchy. After a hard day at work, while other folks were going to the Malt Shoppe, the roller rink or swilling tequila at Club Bloodrock, these insatiable brains were dreaming up a gameworld in which they themselves would like to play. And it wasn't pretty. And it wasn't the Middle Ages, Middle Earth, Disneyland or Outer Space. It was a place from which there is no escape, not really. It was a place where reality and fantasy, dreams and nightmares are interwoven until nothing makes sense any more. It was… it *is*… your mind. Or is it?

Muzak in the streets of Jeannette

So what *is* going on there? DreamForge makes its nest in a small hamlet in western Pennsylvania known as Jeannette. When rounding the corner at the old ice factory, you may notice lots of folks just sittin' thar on their stoops an' ruminatin'. Looks like folks is peaceful in these parts. The streets all seem to be one-way, and muzak is piped into the main areas of town via speakers atop all the utility poles. It's like something out of a John Carpenter film, and you might be tempted to flee immediately. But be brave. Park and enter the old brick building and discover, in a very crowded, cubed environment, the magicians of DreamForge – an extremely talented bunch of people with quite a track record to date. And they have the nerve to be nice as well.

Founded eight years ago by Jim Namestka, Chris Stratka and Tom Holmes, DreamForge has spawned some very solid titles in its time – titles like *WarWind*, *Ravenloft*, *Anvil of Dawn*, and many more. President Jim Namestka is proud of everything the company has done, and although *Menzobarranzen* has sold the most units, he is probably proudest of *Dark Spire*, which he feels is the first game that showcased all of the creative ingenuity and originality that is DreamForge. But currently, the word of the day is *Sanitarium* (published by ASC Games). Not a far out, mega-multiplayer extravaganza, *Sanitarium* has its roots in "the real world" – because the real world is the one that most easily houses our fears.



Rivers of lava and human shish-ka-bob embody Aztec flavor

When "Give us asylum" was not a good thing

"So, what is *Sanitarium* about?" Who asked that? Oh. You. I was afraid you'd ask that. And DreamForge wouldn't tell me, so I certainly can't tell you. In fact, they gleefully spent half a day not telling me, but I'll try to shed some light on the premise.

You wake up in a sanitarium – a very creepy place with a gothic castle motif. The time? Present day. Who are you? You have no idea, but the game is third person, so you can see that your head is completely bandaged. Out of your cell you proceed, and you run immediately into a couple of folks – we'll call them the perseverating head-banger and the chicken lady. The head-banger is pounding his head against a nearby wall, and the chicken lady, well… a lot of elbow action.

This is ASC's third game in 12 months where the guy wakes up and doesn't know where he is. One was *Perfect Weapon*, and the other one (for the PlayStation) is called *One*. Here, you wander quite a bit, meet an inpatient – named Lenny – and others, and begin to hear quite a bit about their Mother(s?). Eventually you stumble upon a videotape (after a fine display of puzzle solving) and see yourself – with inpatient number 8675309 screened on your hospital gown (Jenny), and see the following:

Dr. Morgan: Now son, You've got to stay with me, You've got to hold together…

You: I'm all right…

Dr. Morgan: We have half the battle won if you can keep a clear head and stay with us.

You: What do you mean, "Stay with you?" Where have I gone?

Dr. Morgan: Delusions, son. Your delusions almost took the life from you this time. Do you remember stealing the car?

You: <touching your face> Bandages! Where am I? Who am I?

Dr. Morgan: I wish I knew who you

were, son, but you must've thought you had somewhere important to go when you stole that car…You did a lot of damage to that face of yours in the crash.

You: Oh no. I'm sorry…If I really did…I can't believe…

Dr. Morgan: No apologies necessary, son. It's our job to get you well. All we need is your best effort… We'll talk again soon.

So, yes, it was a car wreck. But then what? Or what before? The entire game is spent gathering information to piece together the story of what you're doing here and why. In a very Kafka-esque experience, you experience flashbacks (in opaque sepia tone) that resolve open issues in your life, and little by little the story comes together.

The team describes the experience as *12 Monkeys* meets *Jacob's Ladder* – if that helps. It's a modern-day psychological thriller, a mystery and a creepshow all rolled into one. Think mutant children; think cries and whispers; think madness; think conspiracy; think delusions of statues that weep blood; think *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*. Or think again.

So are you insane? They wouldn't say. Is sanity your goal? They wouldn't say. Does the whole thing take place in the sanitarium? They wouldn't say. Are there key characters that help or hurt you? They wouldn't say. Got the picture? But rather than a smug "Nyah nyah nyah-nyah nyah. I know something you don't know" attitude, it's clear that any of the answers to these questions would hurt the gameplay experience. Discovery is key here, and it's hard to argue with that.

As bookseller metaphors dance in our heads

Until recently, the state of the industry was such that Chris Stratka, charmingly self-effacing holder of the somewhat unwieldy title, Director of Creative Design and Development, was able to design all the games by himself. At this time, Stratka oversees project design which is, of course, much more team-oriented now. He believes that the choice of a real world environment offers much broader appeal than other possibilities. "If I could use a bookstore as an example," says Stratka, "you walk into a bookstore and the places for fantasy and science fiction are fairly small areas. By far, the best-seller, popular books are contemporary fiction titles."

They admit to no research for the project, only that they were trying to establish a mood and a look ("It's not like we're trying to do *NYPD Blue*, here…"). The asylum is a renovated castle, refurbished but still very gothic (and they did promise devices of torture, yay!). *Sanitarium* has pre-rendered environments that scroll in blocks – of up to 20 or so screens – that designers hope will create a feeling of seamlessness. The artwork is compelling, with a simple, primitive look to the characters and a feel reminiscent of *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*. Buildings have cutaway roofs for interior shots and a three three-quarter perspective that is a bit *Diablo*-esque.

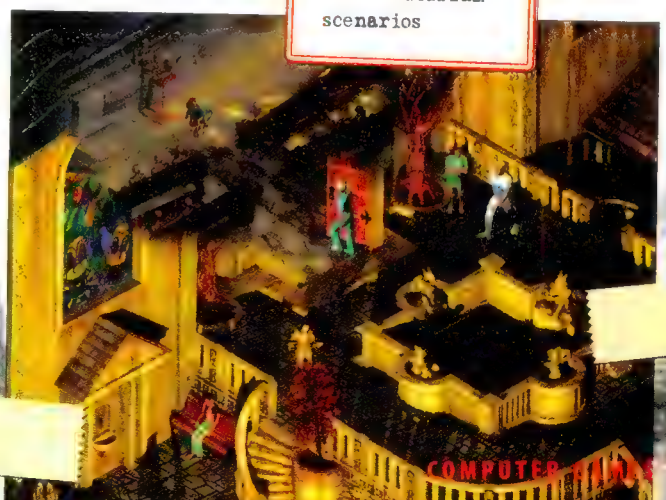
"The strength of this game is not necessarily in its technology, though," says Straka. "We want it to be like when you're reading a book. You to start to read and then 30 seconds after that you forget you're reading. You're there. If the player feels like he's playing a game, then you haven't drawn him in enough. He should be sitting there for hours in front of that game. It should be three o'clock in the morning and *then* he should say, "Oh my god! I have to work in the morning!"

Design notes

The team is extremely dedicated to making the puzzles organic to the story (as is every design team in creation, with mixed success), and promise no chess puzzles (although they came dangerously close to a sliding tile puzzle) and no "non-sequiturs."

Sound and music promise to be very stimulating… although how can the brilliant moans, screams and eerie overlapping whispers and wind effects compare with their juke box renditions of *Rockabilly Swing Thing*, *The Ballad of Captain Dick*, and *Belladonna in A-Flat*? There are an estimated 34-40 hours of gameplay encompassing nine scenarios: four levels in the asylum and five episodes (gulp) elsewhere.

And okay, during the *second* half of the day they broke down and told me what is really going on and then swore me to secrecy. And you'll be glad for that when you play this odd duck of a game. Promise. *–Cindy Yans*



Star Trek: Secret of Vulcan Fury

Star Trek returns to its adventure gaming roots

Like clockwork, games based on the *Star Trek* universe seem to spring up every couple of years or so. The majority of them have been considered average to fair (and that's being kind), but none seemed to tap into the mystique that catapulted the original *Star Trek* episodes to an unparalleled level of popularity. Interplay appears poised and ready to change all that with the upcoming *Star Trek: Secret of Vulcan Fury*.

Vulcans vs. Romulans

For two thousand years, Vulcans and Romulans have fought against each other. Brutal and sometimes bloody confrontations further served to heighten tension, and the animosity felt by both races grew deeper as the centuries went by. As the game begins, the Romulans have returned, proposing a peace treaty to heal the wounds and restore unity. The Romulans appear sincere, but can they really be trusted? Therein lies the conflict for adventure gamers to resolve.

The game will make heavy use of the "television episode" metaphor. Rather than a single story played out through the course of the entire game, Interplay chose to break the game down into a total of six chapters. As sort of a "story within a story," each episode follows its own plot while still furthering the overlying plot. To further distinguish chapters from one another, each one places a different cast member in the starring role (Tribbles were auditioned, but rumor has it their insatiable appetite for procreation interfered with the production).

Detailed background sets were created for the majority of stations on the *U.S.S Enterprise* as well as specific planetary locations, like Vulcan where the first episode takes place. Coupling these elaborate 3D movie sets with a third person perspective (think *Alone in the Dark*), players should get the feeling they're inside a television episode as it transpires. For example, as a crew member walks from the bridge to sick bay, the view may cycle between several camera angles during the sequence.

Talking heads

Filling these rendered scenes are digital models more lifelike than the original cast members (especially at their current ages). These digital models truly resemble their human counterparts, and in uncanny detail. Every aspect of the source actors is replicated, from well known mannerisms and facial expressions to less obvious posture quirks. If Kirk's brow furrows, his model's brow furrows. If Sulu struts a bit differently than Spock, model Sulu will follow suit.

The exhaustive process used to make these digital models involves sculpting clay heads of each actor and many of the developers, who appear as extras in the game. Once the head stiffens (stop it), the team examines the model for any blemishes, knowing that even a barely discernible error would be further amplified later in the process. After passing inspection, the final step involves placing sophisticated sensors onto each model. These sensors convert the real world models into the digital models that appear in the game.

In conjunction with the above process, the original cast met for a group sound session to sample prerecorded dialogue for the game. The design team felt it was important that the entire cast be present for the session, rather than simply recording each crew member separately. As Creative Director David Riordan states, "Having the entire crew together again was fantastic. We felt that the group would feed off each other's enthusiasm, and that the emotion would translate into their dialogue. It's very different from someone in a sound room speaking their lines." Once this dialogue was recorded, the meticulous task of meshing the spoken lines of each character to their digital model's lip movements began. Less a matter of technology and more a matter of time-intensive labor, this single process devours the lion's share of development time.

Trek fiction

The pedestal that *Star Trek* games are placed upon by Trekkers (itching to correct the slightest omission or obscure error) stretches high into the stratosphere. That same pedestal looks feeble compared to the standards the design team maintains for themselves.

Subsequently, the overall themes throughout development have been authenticity and accuracy. In addition to striving to perfect the sets and models, they have enlisted renowned *Star Trek* authority D.C. Fontana to write the game's script and to safeguard against contextual discrepancies. Under her watchful eye, the design team took artistic liberty *only* when encountering gaps in the annals of *Star Trek* lore. If all goes well, staunch Trekkers should be pleased (or at least, happily thwarted) to find a game that is very consistent with regard to the spirit and context of the *Star Trek* universe.

Furthermore, the design team even scrutinized every episode in the original series. Less obvious aspects, like the unique camera angles used in shooting scenes and budget-induced filming shortcuts, were taken into consideration for *Secret of Vulcan Fury*. As David Riordan explains, "After hours upon hours of watching the old episodes, it became clear that folks tend to remember the episodes as having a higher production value than they really did. We want this game to be accurate even to the level of showing aspects of the original series that existed due to budget constraints."

Even though this *Star Trek* installment returns to its adventure gaming roots after a short stint in the action department, players will still encounter plenty of activity and a growing sense of tension as the game goes on. To make the gameworld feel truly dynamic, rather than a basic series of static backgrounds stitched together, every scene and location will be abuzz with constant activity. Expect to see officers shuffling through the corridors and crew members having conversations or carrying out their daily duties.

A unique feature that should reinforce the television metaphor involves the use of "cliffhangers." As players attempt to solve critical problems (like stopping a hostile Klingon vessel from snatching the last box of *Huggies* on the store shelf), they may be whisked away shortly before the scene resolves to an entirely different scene. Later on, they'll return to the original scene to finish their prior work. Heck, any closer to television, and you'll have to adjust Spock's ears for the best reception.

Puzzling questions

What's an adventure game without puzzles, right? Instead of offering isolated logical interludes that distract players from the overall story rather than further it, the puzzles throughout *Secret of Vulcan Fury* will be designed to mesh with the context of each episode. Repairing a failing warp drive, attempting a mind meld, and initiating diplomatic relations are just a few dilemmas that players will face along the way. Note that these tasks play a part *as* the story, as opposed to the commonly used "toll bridge" puzzles (where one simply pays the troll underneath with brain power bucks in order to get farther in the story). To minimize linearity, most of the puzzles can be completed in any order. If one particularly difficult task stumps players, they may simply move on to a different area or problem in the episode, and revisit the current trouble spot at a later time.

The game will also include richly orchestrated music from the same composer who recorded the soundtrack for *Starfleet Academy*. Every "beep," "blip," and alert klaxon will be taken straight from the original series, lending the same level of authenticity to the sound that is being given to the visuals.

Audible gasps broke the silence when the original cast members of *Star Trek* were introduced to their digital counterparts for the first time. To David Riordan, this outpouring of awe made the intensive and detailed labor on his lifelike models all worth while. If everything goes as planned for *Secret of Vulcan Fury*'s Spring release, those same audible gasps will be heard in computer rooms across the globe.
–Tim Royal

Each scene like this will be filled with background activity

Everything on the planet of Vulcan is pointy

Crew members Scott and Greer do routine maintenance on the bridge of the starship

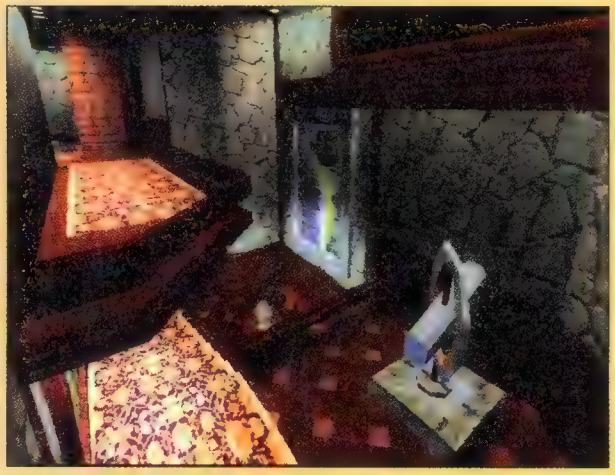
The future of public transit

The USS Rocinante looks great but still has that new starship smell

Carpool is cool, but *beaming* is redeeming

Sin

Ritual's original sin?



◀ **Elexis Sinclair's mansion features some plush real-world textures, including carpet, brick, stone, and unique textures for her art collection**

Let's get right down to brass tacks: what does *Sin* have that the umpteen other upcoming first-person shooters don't have? The answer to that question used to be "Hipnotic," the team that created the *Scourge of Armagon* add-on for *Quake*, one of the best applications of the engine to date. But legal complications have changed that answer to "Ritual," the company's new name. Helmed by an assortment of veteran developers who worked on games like *Duke Nukem 3D* and *Prey*, Ritual has displayed a great deal of talent for pushing the envelope of the *Quake* engine. With *Sin*, they've been given free reign to rework the engine for a game based on their own elaborate story.

Sin's premise pits the player, a cop in the future, against the beautiful industrialist Elexis Sinclair, a woman with a penchant for eugenics through drugs. Her testing has bred a horde of mutants to help carry out her plans on an unsuspecting populace. Rather than laying out the entire story up front, an audio-linked sidekick talks the player through the unfolding plot across six "missions" of 1-8 levels each. "What we're trying accomplish is that by the end of the game, you will have heard the long story, but you won't have to read it from a manual or from text slowly dotting across the screen," says lead programmer Mark Dochtermann, "It'll come in little snippets so it won't disrupt the action."

The game will begin with the player fighting from a helicopter coming to the scene of a bank robbery. The level after the robbery is a chase sequence through the tunnels though which the robbers are escaping. A sniper rifle will be included for some portions of the game. At one point, the player is captured and mutated to participate in gladiatorial combat against other mutants. There will also be a jeep, crane, and submarine ride. "We're not trying to muddy the waters by introducing a flight sim or anything, but we're trying to change up the gameplay a little," said Dochtermann, referring to these various sequences as "little islands of different-ness." But everything Ritual wants to do with *Sin* will be done within the game engine, right down to the in-game "cutscenes" that advance the story.

Sin's concept of Action Based Outcomes is at the heart of their level design. The developers use the acronym "ABO" as casually as they would mention RAM or VGA. "Through your actions, you can have small effects or much larger macro-effects on the gameplay," explained Harry Miller, Ritual's CEO. "We want this to be the most interactive game you've ever played. Anything that's usable, any gears you should be able to turn, anything you should be able to break or blow up, you can. I lot of these things won't effect gameplay, but we'll also have areas where you'll have to deal with the consequences." For example, one level takes place on an oil rig. During the course of the fighting, it's entirely possible to blow holes in pipes and storage tanks. But if you do too much damage, the next underwater level will take place in murky waters with limited visibility. Blow up a vat in the chemical plant and you'll have to contend will pools of hazardous waste in the aqueduct. Allow the enemy to complete their research of an experimental weapon, and you'll be staring at the business end of said weapon a few missions later. There are even branching paths from some missions.

Sin's 16-bit graphics update to the *Quake* engine allow for a sizable color palette to create authentic-looking environments. "If you have a house, it should look like a house," said art director Michael Hadwin, "you shouldn't see riveted walls and that sort of thing. We're doing realistic places, so we want it to look exactly like it should." The level designers proudly displayed a tenement building with brick walls and rotting wood floors, an underwater base that looks like a set from *The Abyss*, and Sinclair's opulent mansion, complete with artwork and an entertainment center. Hadwin puts the number of unique texture maps at 1500 with more to come.

▲ **The geothermal plant is a convenient place to show off gratuitous colored lighting effects**

◀ **An early chase through a tenement building ends up at this construction site. Note the explosion is modeled with particles and alpha blended bit maps**

The character system from *Quake* has been completely reworked, opting for a skeletal system with continuous mesh skins and interpolation to smooth out animations. Variable AI levels will give some creatures the ability to open doors, call for help, organize groups, or dodge attacks. Non-combat characters like civilians or technicians will have the capability to assess threats based on whether you have weapons drawn; walk around with a rocket launcher armed and they'll run to sound an alarm.

In *Scourge of Armagon*, Ritual proved themselves clever level designers. With its commitment to storytelling, its interactive levels, and its updated *Quake* engine, *Sin* is likely to be a tempting offering when it's released in early 1998. *–Tom Chick*

Sin • Activision • Windows 95

Конфликт.

Лидеры.

Самолёты.

Пилоты.

Ваш выбор.

JETFIGHTER FULLBURN

Полёт как рассказ.

MISSION STUDIOS

The Blackstone Chronicles

Legend Entertainment goes insane

"Voices. My voices! My voices…I hear them. I hear them telling me to…" says Bob Joan-of-Arc Bates, president of Legend Entertainment, as his eyes roll back in his head. Oh, all right. Complete exaggeration. But the madness that is *not* spewing forth from Bates is instead festering inside, disturbingly so, as Bates immerses himself in the world of the insane during research for his latest title, *The Blackstone Chronicles*, which should be arriving late in 1998. While his mind is littered with disquieting images, his office is littered with a lot of the research material that helped to cultivate them. Stacks of books form small towers; books such as *America's Care of the Mentally Ill*, *The Art of Asylum Keeping*, *Bedlam, a Year in the Life of a Mental Hospital*, *Asylums and After*, and other light classics. Also prominent and thumb-worn is a set of John Saul's *The Blackstone Chronicles*.

◀ John Saul – Blackstone's black leather

Lightning's sinister silhouette ▼

Saul is something of a household word among horror enthusiasts, (although he prefers to think of his works as psychological thrillers), and he is the first to admit that he is primarily a commercial writer. Through his publisher, Ballentine Books (which has a relationship with Legend), he approached Bates. "John came to us with a proposal for a game. He said, 'This is an idea I've had for a while, I play games, I'm computer literate, I know what's out there in the market, and I think this would make a really good game.'" Bates read his proposal, met with him and agreed; and Saul has been deeply involved in the game's development from the get-go. At some point it was suggested that, since the game involves six characters, perhaps Saul could write six prologues that would be included in the game box. When Ballentine got wind of it, before you could say "marketing coup," the prologues were released as paperbacks, one by one, in the tradition of Charles Dickens, or more recently, Stephen King (*The Green Mile*); each of them leaping into the usual reserved-for-John-Saul slot on the New York Times bestseller list.

The books detail events in a small New England town named Blackstone where an old asylum sits atop a hill. There is a small backstory on the six characters who were at one time inmates in the asylum, each having a personal belonging that has somehow re-emerged into the community. The books are about the tragic events that occur in the lives of the inmates' families when these items appear. The game, however, is about the inmates themselves.

Set primarily in the Asylum, which has been abandoned for some 40 years, the game takes place after the events of the books. It turns out that the inmates' family trees can all be traced back to an evil patriarch. The player-character, similarly related, realizes that all fingers point to the Asylum as the ultimate source of evil.

Legend has not necessarily been known for "pushing the technology envelope," but this game promises to be their most sophisticated so far. Full screen 24-bit graphics will highlight a 10 frame-per-second transitioning engine with 90 degree panning segments in every location. While the Asylum has only about 25 rooms, each room has multiple locations and views for a total of over 170 game screens, almost double the maximum number of screens in any previous Legend title.

While the mechanics of the game are about exploration and problem solving, its crux is fear. Saul's and Bates' main focus in this project is not to startle us, but to scare us deeply ("be afraid, be very afraid"). "I want people to be scared the way we were scared by Poe and Hitchcock," says Bates. "I don't want them to say, 'Well, yeah, I can see how this might be scary to somebody…' I want *them* to be frightened. Not the 'BOO!' kind of frightened… but the kind that creeps in and stays with you. I call it a 'credible threat.' I want something that not only will make the game player say, 'my *character* is in danger,' but I want that feeling to seep through the screen and for the player to say, 'This is bad. This could happen to me.' There's a very fine line between sanity and insanity – between mental health and mental illness. And there's not a whole lot that separates us, the 'allegedly normal,' from those who are committed to a mental institution." And that's a scary thought.

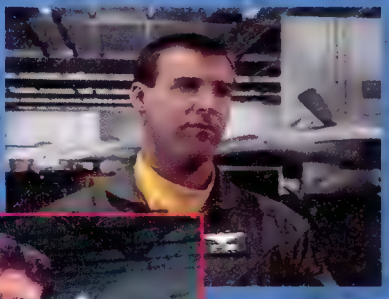
So what is crucial to providing all this delicious fear? The voices, believes Bates – the voice of someone terrified; the voice of the confused; the voice of the child who doesn't understand; the voices of insanity. When the time for voice selection comes, perhaps Mad Bob Bates could rent out the ones in his head. They'd probably be perfect. –*Cindy Yans*

The Blackstone Chronicles • Legend Entertainment • Windows 95

The conflict.

The leaders.

The planes.



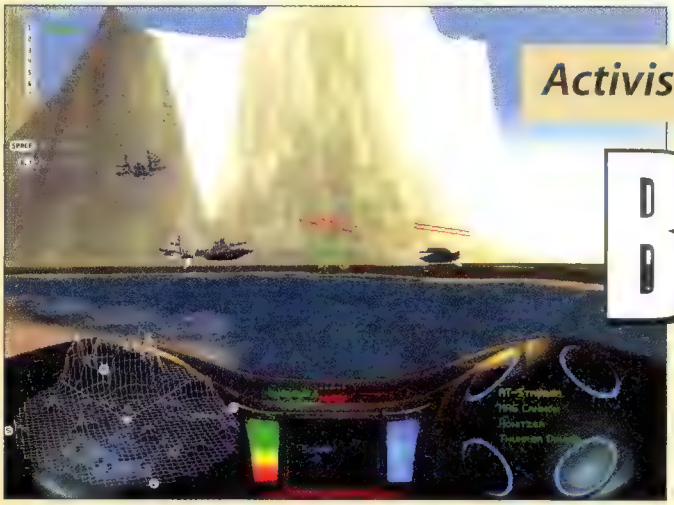
The pilots.

Your choice.

JETFIGHTER FULL BURN

THE FLIGHT SIM WITH A STORY.

MISSION STUDIOS



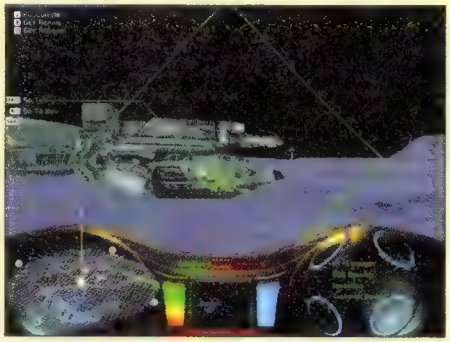
Activision rebuilds a blast from the past

Battlezone

◀ **The sheer peaks in front of you show up clearly on the radar's topographic wireframe display**

The original *Battlezone's* graphics might as well have been twisted out of monochrome green pipecleaners. It featured gameplay with the complexity and depth of *Space Invaders* and an AI with the single-mindedness of a 13-year old making a beeline for an unoccupied *Defender* machine. So one might wonder why Activision decided to name their new game after Atari's 1980 arcade classic. "When we started this, we were looking at revitalizing the classic games," says producer Andrew Goldman, "I was a huge, huge fan of *Battlezone*. I dropped a ton of quarters into it and it was kind of my dream to remake it. But when we broke it down and looked at all its elements, it just didn't add up to a full game by contemporary standards. So what we did was take the elements of *Battlezone* and put them in here. In fact, our ultimate villain is right out of [the original] *Battlezone*."

But tank combat is only half the story in this contemporary version. "We decided to take one of the most revolutionary products," he says, "and carry the legacy forward with another revolutionary product. Everything that's in a [real-time] strategy game is also in *Battlezone*. The key is you do all this without ever leaving the first person view." There was a "severe design challenge" in this marriage of the situational awareness a god-game offers with the thrill and uncertainty of a first-person shooter. But after working for a year and half, Goldman's come up with what he hopes is an intuitive and fluid interface. Based on a wireframe topographic map that appears in one corner of the cockpit, it uses symbols to display different units and is connected to a hot-key driven menu system. Menu items trace lines to their corresponding units on the map and include bar graphs that display damage and ammo remaining.

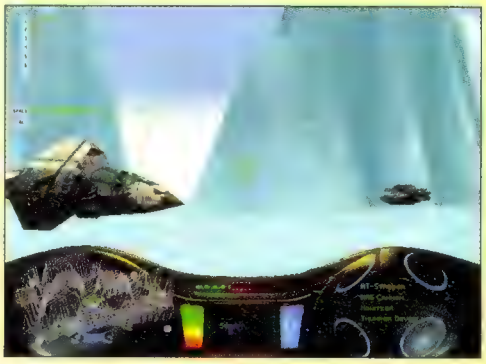


The foundation for building your forces is an alien metal mined from deposits or recovered from destroyed enemies. Pilots are also a key resource, as each scenario offers only a limited number; when vehicles are destroyed, their pilots bail out and scramble to safety unless you hunt them down. Factories can only be set up on thermal geysers, which limits initial base placement somewhat, but any unit, even defensive turrets, can be moved to new locations. New units can be assigned to guard other units or attached to your own vehicle to serve as wingmen. Navigational beacons (which double as remote cameras) are used to maneuver clusters of units to distant areas and organize assaults.

A mission construction kit will ship with the game. It presents a wireframe view of the terrain, which can be kneaded into whatever sort of landscape a player desires. The game uses a direct port of *Dark Reign's* AI, so an entirely new scenario can be generated each time you play by merely dropping a basic factory onto a map; the computer will use it to build scavengers, then scouts, then combat units.

A tech tree makes new units and weapons available as you gather alien relics. The game takes place in the 1960s, offering a bit of revisionist history in which the space race is just a front for government efforts to harvest the alien metal. Units sport US or Soviet markings and infantry will be fitted with Neil Armstrong-style space suits; the soundtrack will use music reminiscent of The Doors and militaristic Soviet themes. Perhaps an odd choice, but certainly true to the time period.

The player can choose the Americans or the Soviets on their path through seven different worlds. As they progress through the scenarios, a story evolves about the overall campaign and the other groups involved in the war. "Ultimately what happens is one of these groups gets super-powerful" says Goldman, "The only way to survive is to ally with the Soviets and go after this renegade brigade." (He mentions a "Heart of Darkness element" at this point: a Cold War Colonel Kurtz chasing alien metals instead of ivory?) "If I play through from the Soviet side and you play through from the American side, we meet at the point where we have to go after this renegade group. At that point, we can take our single player campaign and go cooperatively fight against the AI. That's how we're trying to introduce people into the multiplayer arena." As for the final scenarios and the ultimate enemy, Goldman will only cryptically say, "It's definitely not going to be what anybody expects."

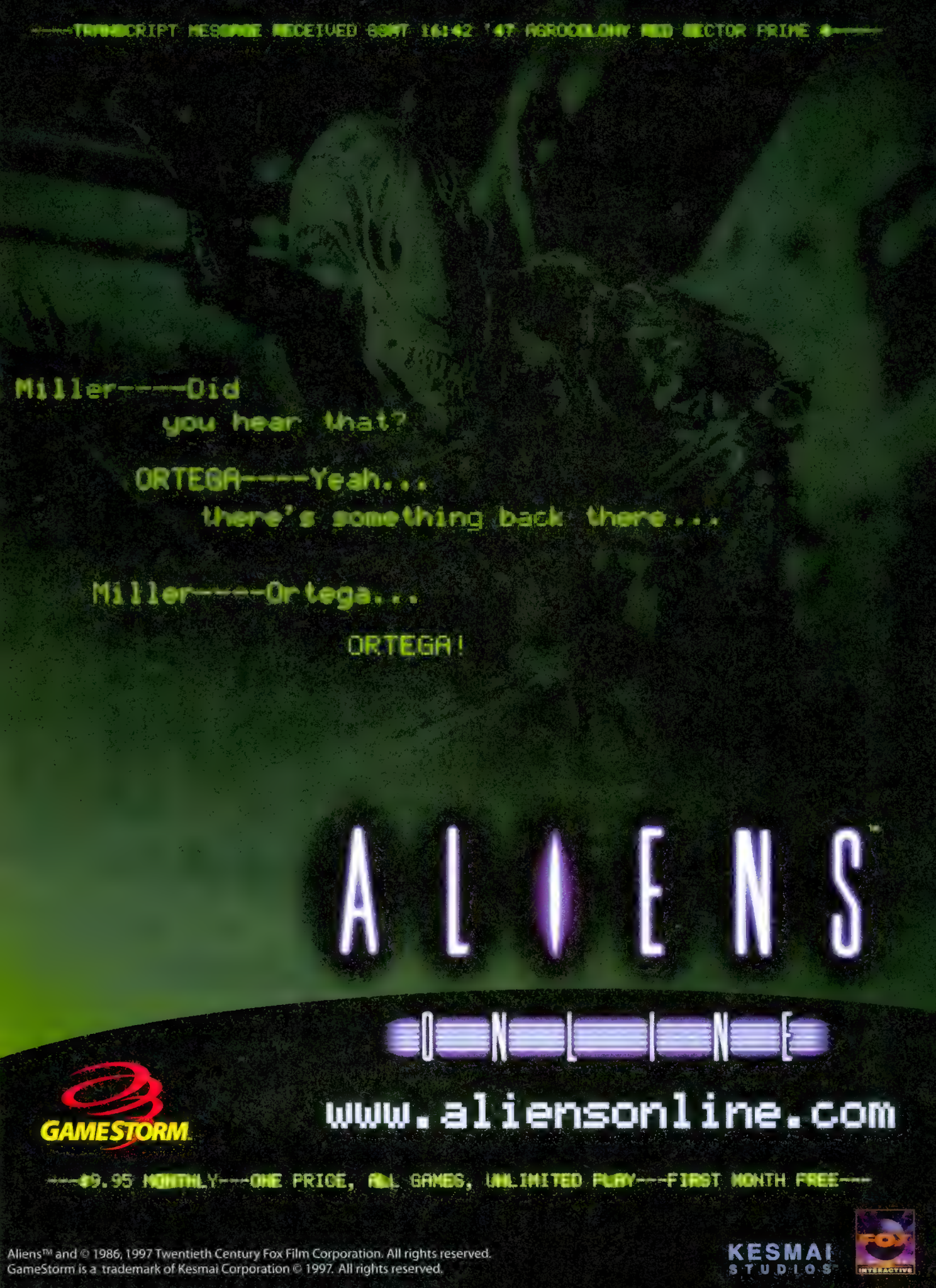


▲ **In addition to desertscape and lunarscape, there will be ice worlds. There may even be volcanic activity on the volatile Jovian moon, Europa**

◀ **Look closely and you can see chipped paint on the units, making for a realistic distressed look**

The multiplayer head-to-head games will have the added element of combatants using different vehicles. But once he's shot down, a player will find himself running for cover on foot, trying to reach the safety of a new vehicle. "You don't get the frag until you get the person, not the unit," says Karpas. "It's really satisfying to run people over," he adds with a mischievous glint in his eye. Expect the squishing to begin first quarter of 1998. *–Tom Chick*

Battlezone • Activision • Windows 95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ORTEGA----Yeah... there's something back there...
Miller----Ortega...
ORTEGA!
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Extreme Tactics

Ex-Disney employees go ex-treme

"Psst! Hey, buddy! Got any spare tank parts?"

Hoping to avoid both the stigma of being lumped in with the real-time strategy pack and the rut of stacking useless extras into nothing more than a direct translation, Media Station has been laboring away silently on *Extreme Tactics*. They're aiming for a product that minimizes drudgery, focuses on strategy, and makes crafting armies a challenging art, rather than a side note.

As much as they'd like to distance *Extreme Tactics* from being labeled as another clone, it has distinct similarities to games that have gone before. Two rival clans duking it out on the surface of a planet. Collecting limited resources to build a mightier force. Following a pre-set campaign to its scripted conclusion. These are familiar. After that, the scenery changes from desert sagebrush of commonality to a thriving rain forest of creativity.

The game intends to offer crisp, clean photo-realistic maps, plotted in 3D to accommodate sight and range modifiers based on elevation. A key feature will be the two-level zoom which lets players see the action up close (especially useful when manually controlling a weapon on a vehicle—yes, you can do that), or get a satellite view showing more of the battlefield.

▲ **Take control of any weapon on any unit yourself**

Your Airborne CoatHanger Division mops up AAA batteries. Great for car door locks, too! ▶

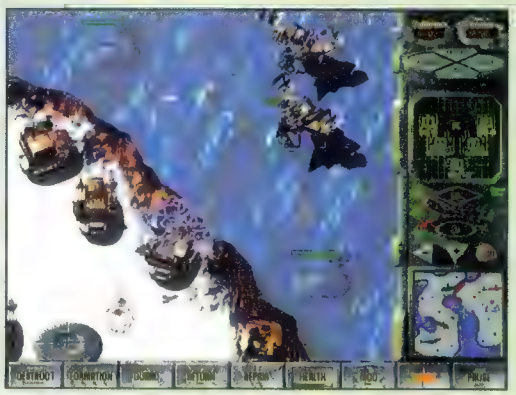
Say goodbye to the chafing shackles of resource management. Only three resources (Calibrium, Coolar crystals, and glow-in-the-dark drool) require stockpiling. The MCC, your version of a king in Chess, handles the latter by wiggling its haunches atop a rich crystal deposit. Miners shuttle Calibrium from… get this… mines.

Most real-time strategy games make players build a foot powder factory, which opens the door for a new pro curling stadium, which finally produces the radar station they wanted in the first place. *Extreme Tactics* strips away the tangled web of co-dependence on structures. Players construct only relay stations, six portable buildings that offer unique bonuses to the owner.

In current real time games, building your army loosely translates to constructing a nude *Lego* statue of Angela Lansbury (Just stop when it begins to hurt. What? Done already?) In *Extreme Tactics*, a considerable chunk of the game involves tailoring and customizing each unit. Included in the final release will be the Hoover, Fireball, and DeathGhost. Not just limited to these stock types, players can use all the available spare parts on hand to create their own vehicles. Opportunities exist for changing chassis settings, modifying weapon loadouts, setting repair levels, and outfitting new technologies like stealth and shielding. Units gain experience from combat, as well as change behavior based on a simplistic AI "stance" (where they'll pursue, avoid, or attack enemies as directed).

Another notable feature, battalions, allows pre-assignment of any number or type of vehicles to a group. Select this group, and the MCC builds every unit in order, automating the unit production process to the player's liking.

Games that offer extensive customization options often fall flat when those changes make little or no visible impact on the combat field. In *Extreme Tactics*, every modification, no matter how minute, will alter a vehicle's behavior. Change chassis types, and your newly created (and appropriately named) "Crabby Climber" hurtles over rock formations that would otherwise bar its path. Or, trade in daunting offensive firepower for stealth on your other custom "Miss Curfew" hovercraft.



Other planned features include a level design editor; artifacts that hinder or help the player when retrieved; downloadable unit types from the company's web site; directional advantage, where attacking a unit's flank does greater damage than a frontal assault; and a full-featured campaign with cut scenes to further the story.

At this stage of development, *Extreme Tactics* appears quite solid. It much more closely resembles a hybrid of *Carnage Heart* (from the PlayStation), and *Mission Force: Cyberstorm* than the "Big Red." Without the name recognition and prime time coverage of other games, it's likely *Extreme Tactics* will need to stand on its own merits to attract a sufficient number of gamers. Unless something goes horribly awry, it should have plenty of legroom to work with. *–Tim Royal*

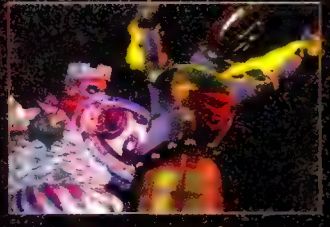
Extreme Tactics • Media Station • Windows 95

Combat CHESS

CHESS HAS A FIGHT ON ITS HANDS

The stunning game of tournament level chess played with living battling characters

You've never seen chess like this. One moment you're testing yourself at Grand Master level on a standard board. Then, with the click of a mouse, the pieces have taken on an awesome life of their own - and you're locked into a battle between good and evil, where losing just isn't an option



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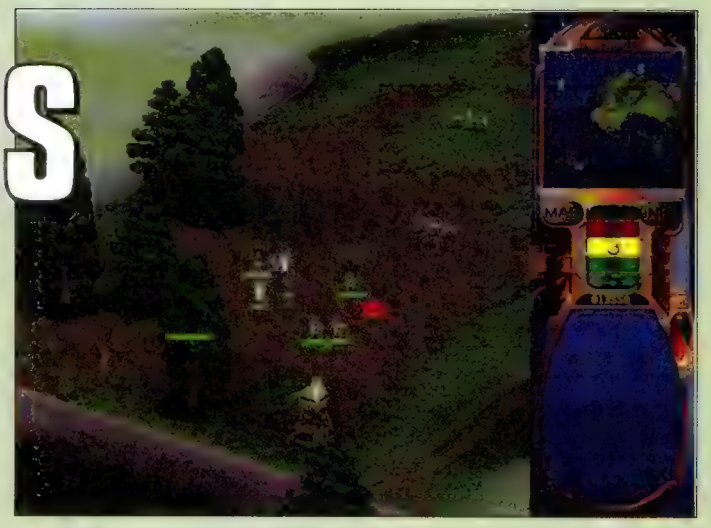
WarGames

A W.O.P.R. of a game?

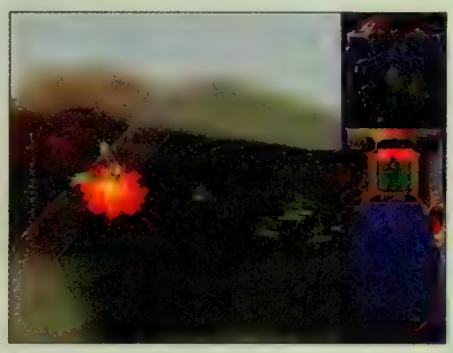


Can a computer feel emotions? Playing as W.O.P.R., your forces are surprised by a human guard tower hidden in the trees ▶

The Cold War's over, and what's a reformed strategic defense computer to do? If you're W.O.P.R you get reprogrammed to test conventional military scenarios. Along the way, of course, something goes wrong, thereby setting the stage for MGM Interactive's *WarGames*. Set 20 years after the movie of the same name, the game posits what happened to the hero, Matthew Broderick's David Lightman, hacker extraordinaire. After his adventures with NORAD, the military decided to hire him (if you can't beat 'em, have him join you) to reprogram W.O.P.R. for its new conventional function. In true mid-Eighties fashion, David made a mint, enough to buy out Protovision, the company he was trying to break into in the first place, and to do what he really wanted to do: develop and release games. Somehow something goes wrong with W.O.P.R. (sloppy patch code?), and it resets to its original programming.... Can you say "Do you want to play a game?"

This is where you enter the picture. You play a gamer who, while surfing Protovision's web site, gets challenged to fight W.O.P.R and its computerized conventional forces in some 30 "simulated" missions. Well, you *think* they're simulated, but you can't really risk losing, because if W.O.P.R. wins, it considers its plans proven against the enemy (humanity, in this case) and it will go to war for real.

An interesting introduction for what is, in essence, a real-time strategy game in the mould of *Command & Conquer*... not surprising, perhaps, for the game's Executive Producer, Robb Alvey, was in on the Virgin side (versus the Westwood side) of production on games such as *Dune II* and (at least in its early days) *C&C* itself. A fan of what he considers a genre unto itself, Alvey has wanted to do a real-time game along the lines of a new-generation *C&C* – no orcs, no forces battling in space sometime in the distant future, nothing like that; rather, a setting close to the modern day, with elements that would be obvious to all. MGM, while not forcing the producers at MGM Interactive to use its movies as game fodder, does make the licenses available. Interactive Studies, the game's developers, had a real-time engine, but no real story around which to build a game. Combined, Alvey had exactly the components he needed for his game.



▲ Chalk one up for the carbon-based types as a robot walker goes "boom"

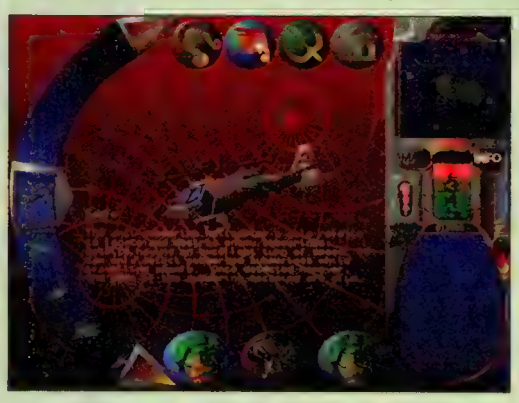
One if by land, two if by sea, and a stream of AA fire if by air ▶

The main thing that puts *WarGames* a generation ahead of *C&C* (technologically, at least) is its use of a 3D viewpoint. While used in Mindscape's *Shadow of the Horned Rat* and in Bungie's upcoming *Myth: The Fallen Lords*, this is the first time it's been applied to a pure *C&C*-style game. Not limited to merely a fixed isometric viewpoint, the alpha version we looked at lets you spin the view around 360 degrees and zoom in and out; the only 3D element not yet implemented is the ability to change the angle of your viewpoint flexibly (there is an overhead view, and Alvey tells us that they may be adding "another angle or two"). While the polygon-based terrain and units look fine in regular mode, Interactive Studios is working to add 3Dfx support for those who have the hardware.

Anyone who's played one of the recent crop of real-time strategy games should feel right at home with *WarGames*; "lasso" a group of units, click to move, click to target – all the conventions of the genre are here. Aside from 3D, there are a few other additions to the mix; for example, missions can have secondary objectives in addition to the primary. More interesting is the fact that the computer has objectives in missions too, so if it accomplishes its objectives it wins, even if you were leading in the body count.

W.O.P.R forces are all mechanical and are, in general, stronger and more technologically advanced but less numerous while humans have greater numbers of weaker conventional units. Units will be designed in a "rock-paper-scissors" fashion so that no one kind of unit will be all-powerful.

The game can be played from either the human or the W.O.P.R perspective. There will be 15 missions per side, divided into three campaigns. According to Alvey, missions are played from the perspective of both sides, but when this is done the maps won't be identical (only the general setting of the mission), thereby increasing gameplay. Currently there are no plans for an editor, but Alvey says "I think we are looking really closely at some sort of random level generator, or random unit generator... something to give the player more to do after completing all the missions. I can guarantee we *will* have something in there to prolong gameplay." In addition to single player there will be several multiplayer modes: cooperative or free-for-all (deathmatch), global domination (destroy everything) or capture-the-flag. The engine currently supports up to four players, but they hope to have this up to eight by the time *WarGames* releases sometime early in '98. *–Scott Udell*



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GameSlice Weekly

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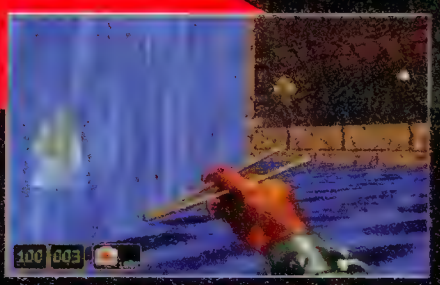

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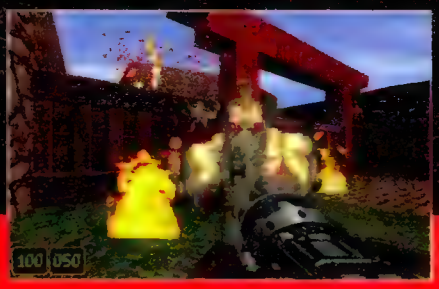

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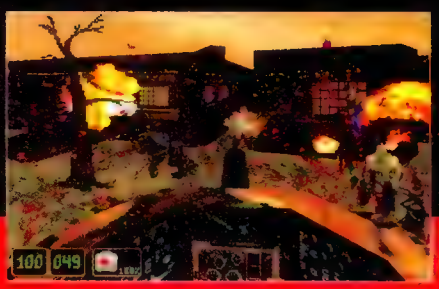

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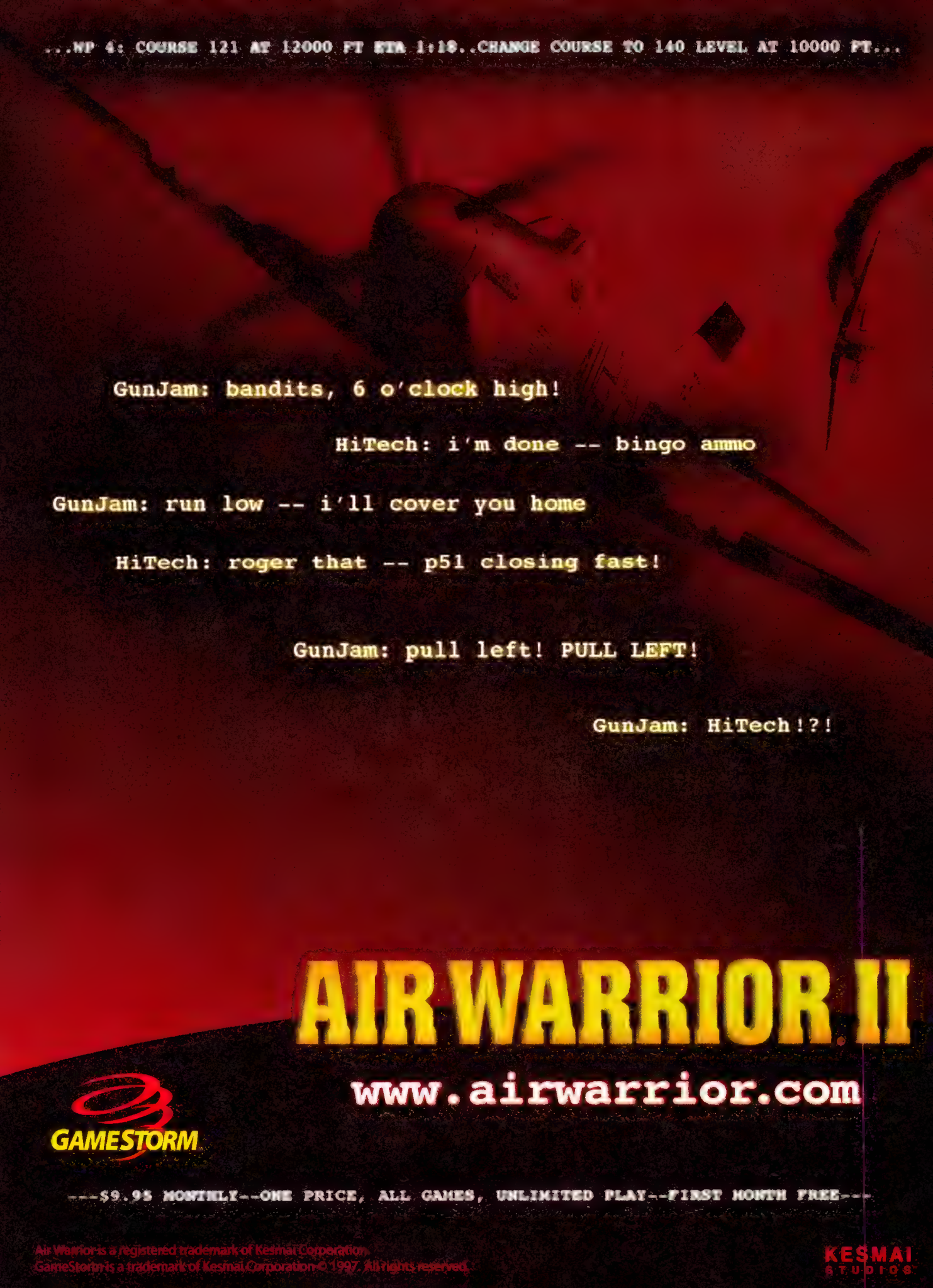
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KESMAI STUDIOS

Over the Net

Kali is dead

Kali is dead. Yep. You read that right. Kali is dead–it just doesn't know it yet. Not right now, no–and perhaps not even within a year. But the end is coming, and there's nothing anybody can do to stop it.

The next obvious question is "Why?" To explain that, we'll need to delve into the past for a little and give a bit of background on Kali. Fear not! We shall return to discuss the topic at hand.

Kali is the brainchild of a gentleman named Jay Cotton–just a normal guy who happened to be a huge fan of *Descent* when it was first released. Unfortunately, the single player game in *Descent* pretty much sucked (to be blunt)–multi-player action was where the game shone. Problem was, most people didn't have a LAN available to play the game multi-player, which sort of put a damper on things when they heard all about the fun they were missing from their network-endowed cronies.

Jay saw this problem and did a little thinking. The end result was that he came up with the idea of coding a shim that would basically sit in-between the game and a TCP/IP network. The shim looked and acted just like an IPX network layer to the game, allowing you to start up a gaming session just as though you were playing on a LAN. The slick part was that once the shim received a packet it would actually send it via TCP/IP over the Internet (also known as a Wide Area Network, or WAN) to another player.

As you might guess, players flipped out over the possibilities–and Jay saw a business opportunity. The shim began to expand and evolve as he added features; instead of supporting only *Descent*, he began to turn it into a general IPX game via WAN emulator–and named it Kali.

Kali was a huge success as soon as it was announced. For one, you could play almost any IPX-enabled game over the net with it–and it's important to remember that this was a time when there really weren't other ways to play a lot of these games across the Internet. In many ways, it was the prehistoric era of online gaming. In addition, Jay decided to charge a simple one-time fee of $20 to register. (New users could download a trial version of Kali to test it out; however, it timed out and stopped working after 20 minutes.) That low fee greatly appealed to the "everything-should-be-free-on-the-Internet" crowd–and in truth, it *was* a great deal.

Since then, Kali has continued to evolve. Early iterations were extremely user-unfriendly, forcing players to configure public domain TCP/IP stacks in DOS and perpetually try to squeeze the last bit of free system memory out of their system to even get their games to run. However, Jay kept up with the Windows 95 revolution and released a native version (cleverly called Kali95) which was even easier to use. Kali95 works with the Windows 95 TCP/IP stack, and basically removed the vast majority of configuration work users used to have to do.

▲ **...but how long will the Force remain with Jay Cotton and Kali?**

More real-time strategy than you can shake an IPX network at ▶

On top of all these successes, Kali's numbers look good, too. To date, Kali has over 180,000 registrants, with servers in over 60 countries. 130,000 of those players are still active, with around 18,000 playing on any particular day for 2-3 hours. In short, things are looking very good for Jay and Kali... for now.

I can already imagine the rabid responses we're going to get on this one (and ironically enough, probably not from Jay). In the hopes of calming some of you down a little, let me let you in on a little secret of mine. In case you hadn't already guessed, I like Kali. Always have, always will.

And by like, I mean *really* like. I was one of Kali's beta testers back when Jay was polishing up the very first DOS version. I was one of very early registrants (just missing the half-price beta registration offer), and have played countless hours of *Command & Conquer*, *Warcraft*, and *Duke Nukem 3D* with it. And to this date, I have

Kali95 installed on my machine, and I still recommend it to people who want an inexpensive way to game "long distance". Heck–I even like Jay and his company, who have always been incredibly open and responsive to the Kali community.

Yet, in spite of all that, Kali is still dead. It just doesn't know it yet. And here's why:

The online gaming industry is delineating itself along two basic financial models. The first model is free gaming subsidized by retail sales of the boxed game, à la battle.net or Westwood Chat. The second is the original pay-for-play model many online gaming networks are hanging on to. The problem for Kali is that these financial models are shifting, and it's looking more likely that companies are going to want to control player access to their properties.

The free gaming networks are adding more and more features as users demand them, which is slowly but surely driving the cost of running those networks up. Thus it's likely the game company networks will eventually start charging for some of their premium content, while keeping older content free. In addition, the pay-for-play gaming networks are moving much the same way–having older free content while charging for premium titles. The final piece of the puzzle is that companies following either model also hope that advertising revenue will help subsidize their costs.

The key element to either of these financial models working are eyeballs. Both models depend on gamers having a reason to come to *their* respective services–first, during the "free" era to build a consumer base, and eventually, to draw people to view advertising or pay-for-play content (using the generic free content as a loss-leader).

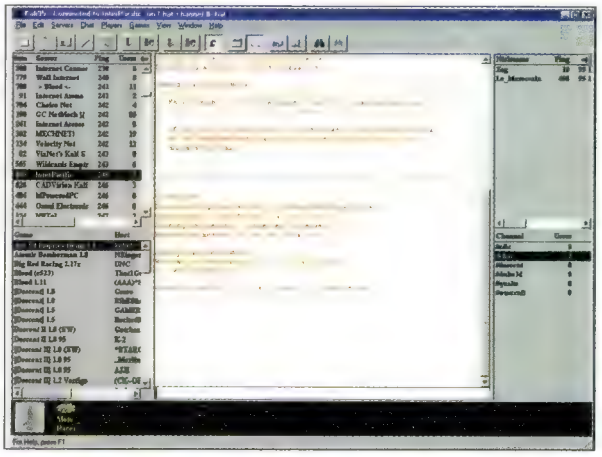
Assuming this is the case, LAN over WAN emulators such as Kali are going to have some difficult times ahead. Currently Kali (and Kahn, a Kali-clone–say that three times fast!) have succeeded by a) having a low, one-time registration fee, and b) piggybacking on continued game company IPX support. Up to now, companies such as Blizzard and Westwood haven't minded Kali too much. Although they made no money from Kali sales directly, it was at least likely that there was additional revenue being brought in thanks to selling additional copies of game titles.

Lately, however, the game companies have begun to understand the need for owning and controlling their own online gaming networks–and with them, their gaming properties. Looking ahead, they see that they need to build a dedicated consumer base if they're to survive. To that end, it's beginning to make less and less sense to support IPX in retail versions of games. If they do indeed choose to include IPX support in a title, it makes more sense to support IPX in a manner that forces the game to be run on an internal LAN, and be unplayable over Kali. Jay has stated suspicions that certain (to remain unnamed) companies have already attempted to lock out Kali users. I happen to know for a fact that he's right about one large company in particular (let's just say their major titles were in the top five of this year), and I'm pretty sure about a couple of others.

In short, it's not looking good for Kali. The game companies are in the driver's seat here. All it takes to add a vast amount of gamers to their gaming network solution is a simple decision to not support standard IPX–which in turns means dollars flowing into *their* coffers, not Jay's. And although Jay has done an admirable job of tweaking Kali to support titles which might have been purposely Kali-crippled, it's a losing battle. Simple packet-flooding (sending large game packets far more quickly than the Internet can handle) will cripple Kali-support for a title while leaving the game completely playable over a fast IPX network. Although Jay's been able to find clever ways in the past to compress and eliminate unnecessary packets, he's also been exploiting an area the game company programmers haven't been too concerned about. If the game companies crack down, expect Kali support for newer titles to come to a crashing halt.

It's a pity, too. Kali is an online gaming institution, and Jay Cotton has possibly done more to advance the state of affordable online gaming than anyone else out there. But it's the end of an era–the heavies are moving in, drawn by the scent of big money pouring down the pipes in the years ahead. And smaller houses like Jay's are going to be squeezed out unless they can find a new niche that's not so easily locked out. Hopefully he'll find a way… but sadly enough, I sure can't see it. *–André Vrignaud*

André Vrignaud has worked in the computer gaming industry since 1990, although he admits the Atari 2600 had a great influence on his formative years well before then. Most recently he's worked at SSI and TEN, where he produced much of their online content and direction, and is currently working for Intel in their New Media Programs group. He is always interested in stimulating, albeit inflammable, e-mail (including rumors, tips, and other random trivia) and can be reached at overthenet@cdmag.com.



◀ **The Kali interface…in all of its glory**

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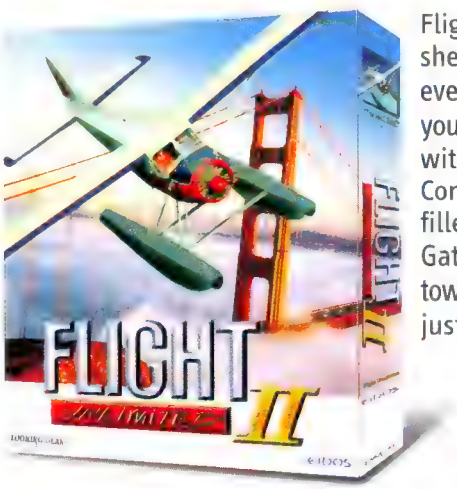

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Ultima Online

Far from the ultimate RPG

From the moment Origin announced *Ultima Online*, expectations ran high. The idea was breathtaking: a massively multiplayer RPG, a huge, complex, persistent world, and all the rich history and lavish detail of *Ultima*. Two rounds of semi-private beta testing only increased the anticipation of the multitudes, as gamers not lucky enough to land a spot in the beta test pestered the more fortunate for updates and status reports. Finally, in September of 1997, Origin released *Ultima Online*, as a Charter Edition costing about $90 and a regular edition going for around $60. Was it worth the wait?

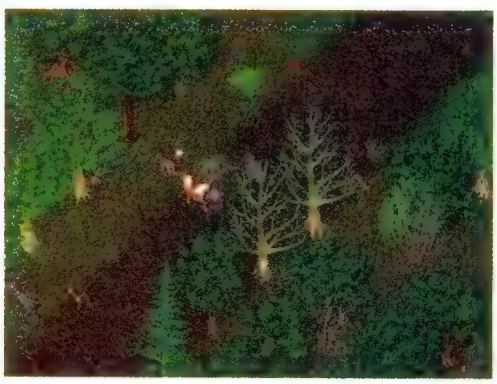
Simply put, no. Admittedly, any online game of this scope and scale is always going to be a work in progress. Any review is no more than a snapshot, an assessment of the game at a given point in time. Still, given that caveat, at this point in time, *Ultima Online* isn't ready for prime time; not even close. It suffers from technical problems (lag, overcrowding, crashes, bugs), design problems (a broken economy, brain-dead NPCs, a wacky ecology, scarcity of monsters) and conceptual problems (emphasis on the mundane instead of the adventurous, ghettoized communities, mixed-up metaphors). True, this is one game with great potential, but potential isn't reviewable. The bottom line is that gamers who shell out their sixty clams (plus $9.95 a month) for this product are not getting their money's worth.

The basic structure of the game is familiar enough. Players create characters, each with three primary statistics (Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence) and choose three primary skills (including such arcana as herding and animal taming in addition to the more familiar combat and adventuring skills). After this, the next step is choosing starting location from among the many in Britannia; inns, taverns, temples and such in the various cities and towns are available. Players start with 100 gold and a selection of items germane to their skills: a blacksmith begins with some smith tools, a bowyer with the materials to make bows and arrows. They don't start with anything more deadly than a dagger and a practice weapon, however, and all lack armor at the start. There is no directing demiurge guiding players' actions *in Ultima Online*; what players do next is completely up to them.

Travel is by foot, horse, or boat, though the latter two require some gold or the kindness of strangers. Roads link much of Britannia, though these can be dangerous, and moongates serve as a variable teleportation system between cities. The forests of the realm are filled with flora and fauna, and sometimes with creatures of unnatural origin; dungeons and evil temples dot the landscape, as lures to the unwary. The towns are filled with shops and shoppers, guards and thieves; in many respects, the world of *Ultima Online* has all the makings of a great fantasy environment. There is no time limit in the game, no set goal or purpose. Players are free to do as they will, to terrorize the innocent or protect the weak as they see fit. Guards will kill any who steal or attack in the cities, but on the highways of Britannia, strength and wisdom are the only thing standing between a character and an early grave. Death, however, is far from final. Instant resurrection (with penalties to statistics) or a period of wandering as a ghost (temples can raise the dead) follow the unexpected termination of bodily functions, and the land is filled with the corpses of those who moved too slowly or thought too little.

Ultima Online, however, is a fine idea, indifferently implemented and plagued with problems. Technical problems have been the most apparent so far. Lag is often horrible. This depends a lot on the quality of a gamer's ISP, and on the general status of the 'Net at game time, but Origin bears some of the blame as well. Origin started with three servers, and at this writing is now fielding six; someone severely underestimated usage it seems. Even with multiple servers to choose from, within each server (game world) popular locations are frequently jammed, making lag a real problem and hindering social and commercial interaction (not to mention combat). Servers crash all too frequently, connections are dropped, and there are a variety of bugs that range from game-ending crashes to allowing little tricks that render much of the elaborate social and economic structure meaningless. Being intricate and complex, UO suffers more than most games when beset with technical problems.

Even if every user had a T3, and each server was a supercomputer, all the problems with *Ultima Online* wouldn't go away. The economy doesn't work well; too many peo-



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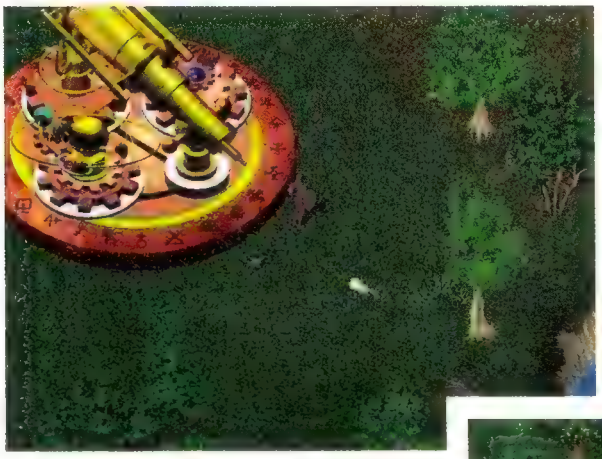
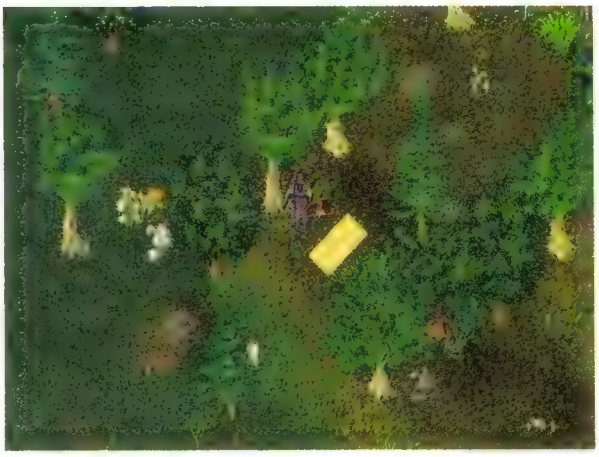
Llama Fest '97 – animal tamer is a popular choice of profession

Gorilla blocking path – film at eleven…these are pets left over from their owner's demise

Sic transit gloria mundi…the fate of thieves in Britannia's towns





[clockwise from top]

This giant telescope no doubt plays a role in the local lore

Caligula and his horse practice swordsmanship

Ready to camp out in the great outdoors...camping or logging out in an inn are the safe ways to leave the game

Safe in an inn...as long as the llama is housebroken

ple are trying to sell too much of the same thing (and no one will buy anything more exotic). Shopkeepers are always broke, and player characters don't want or need most of the things other players can make using their skills. NPCs all too often seem oblivious to the world around them, don't respond well to player questions, and offer grossly out of place suggestions. Many have a habit of screaming across a crowded store asking a player to murder someone for them. And, to top things off, for a game that purports to emphasize conversation and social interaction, *Ultima Online* goes out of its way to make that difficult. While having conversations appear above the speaking character's icon sounds like a good idea, in practice these conversations overlap and overwrite each other all too frequently, especially in laggy conditions. Worse, because technical issues have forced the establishment of multiple game servers, there is no single game world. Players on the Atlantic server cannot interact with players on the Pacific server, for instance, and everyone must create new characters for each server if they wish to play there. As each server is ostensibly "best" for a particular geographic region, this means that the community of *UO* gamers is in essence ghettoized, segregated into regional clumps with little interaction.

Finally, *Ultima Online* suffers from a bit of schizophrenia. In addition to the problem of multiple servers carving up the gaming world, there is the matter of focus. Most role-playing games emphasize roles that gamers would not immediately associate with their day to day lives. Swordswoman, dragon slayer, wizard, Black Knight – these are the sorts of things that gamers associate with RPGs. Yet *Ultima Online* seems to operate under the assumption that what gamers really want is a virtual world complete with virtual drudgery. This is a game that requires players to spend hours of real time doing nothing more interesting than repeatedly clicking the mouse on a tiny image of a stuffed target dummy, in order to increase combat skills. This is a game that expects players to focus most of their energies for the first few (real-time) weeks in the game on making a living, buying and selling the same products over and over and over, just to accumulate enough gold to begin to have fun. This is a game that, as the crowning glory of a vigorous training regimen, advocates going off into the woods and... killing rabbits. So what is it? A fantasy RPG, or *9 to 5 Part II*?

Yes, the idea of a virtual world, an RPG world much more "realistic" and detailed than normal, is good. But Origin doesn't go the distance with this idea. The towns and forests, for instance, are not destructible. Terrain is phenomenally unvarying across leagues of space. The economy is more 1990's than anything the Medieval or Renaissance period ever resembled, and the NPCs that populate the world do little to make players feel they are in a real place. Worst of all, though, Origin seems to have created the thing they seem to have set out to avoid, namely, a game where the only thing anyone cares about is money, items, and killing things. How? By making it boring and difficult to do anything else. As hard as it is to build up a character to survivable levels, it is infinitely easier and more entertaining to do so than it is to really roleplay anything else. Who wants to be a herder? Few gamers will want to spend $10 a month to, say, make chairs that no one wants to buy. So much for a dynamic world of real people; say hello to another one-dimensional environment. By not making non-adventuring activities rewarding, while at the same time providing a very elaborate system of combat and magic, Origin has got the worst of both worlds. The game is hard, frustrating, and boring to get going in, due to the so-called "realistic" elements, but the things that real-world people can do to make life bearable simply aren't feasible or rewarded. Catch-22.

This is one game that might *become* a classic, but it isn't one now, despite a *New York Times* story on the front page of the business section. A game that requires a credit card and Internet access before the player can get even a glimpse of what's going on had better be incredibly engrossing or at least immediately accessible. *Ultima Online* is neither. The "undoubted future of interactive entertainment"? God forbid. At best, it might eventually grow into a solid, mature game that delivers the goods, but for now, *caveat emptor*. *–Robert Mayer*

★★☆☆☆

Ultima Online

Origin • www.origin.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM, 32 bit Internet connection

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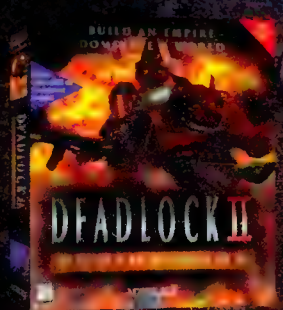

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Chron X

Ghosts in the Machine

Whether you're playing poker, *Go Fish*, or *Magic: the Gathering*, there's something almost mystical about shuffling cards before a game. It is the tangible act of folding chaos into order, stirring the diamonds into the clubs, the Mountains into the Plains, the Serra Angels into the Sengir Vampires. All card games are ultimately about pulling patterns from a randomized deck, whether it's a pair of kings, a sequence of numbers, or enough Forests to summon a Craw Wurm. So how can a card game deny you the flutter of cardstock riffling past your fingertips into a little packet of chaos?

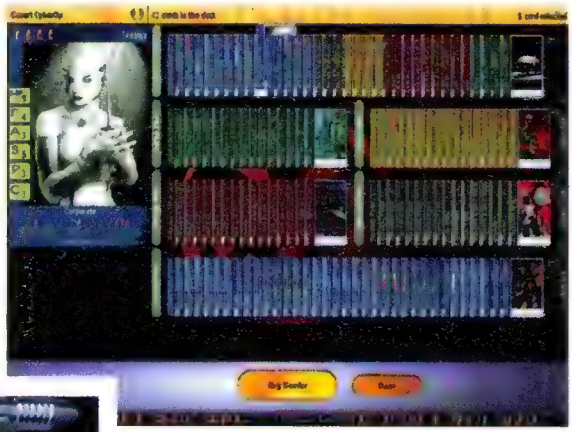
This is a sacrifice required for Genetic Anomalies' *Chron X* collectible card game (CCG). You buy cards that don't physically exist, so you can't shuffle them. You can't spread them out on a table. You can't put them in protectors. You can't keep them in a box. You can't spill Dr. Pepper on them. You can't scratch, bend, mutilate, or misplace them. Since they're just virtual cards on a server in Massachusetts, many dyed-in-the-wool CCGers will regard this game and its digital phantoms with suspicion. But behind this strange new concept is a unique combination of the best of CCGs, strategy games and Internet multiplayer gaming.

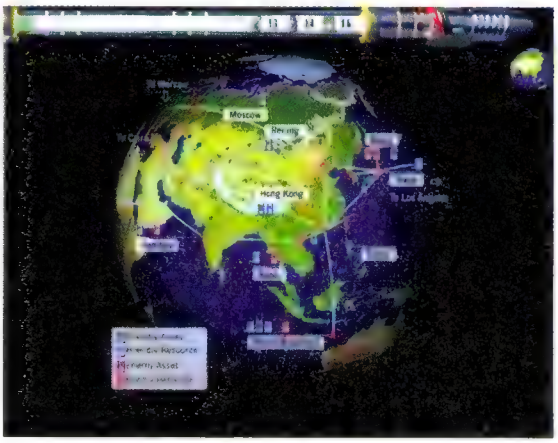
Chron X is free to anyone content with a paltry sixty cards and no access to the ranking system on Genetic Anomalies' server. But for $25, a player gets 180 cards and their name on a list that tracks everyone's wins, losses, and relative standing. Although you can play against a perfunctory AI to test deck designs and learn the rules, *Chron X* was made to be played among humans logged onto the server, who pair off in peer-to-peer connections during bouts. The setup is stable and fluid, the players tend to be courteous and focused, and the system is secure from cheating. A separate area is available to build and sort cards, with a series of filters available to make things more manageable. Additional cards can be purchased at a price comparable to paper-based cards and trading is available to round out collections, all under the watchful eye of the server.

Chron X sports a cyber-punk motif. It's your run-of-the-mill dark, nihilistic futurism, but it's not as richly drawn as similarly-themed CCG's like *On the Edge* or *Heresy*. Flavor text is infrequent and curt, so the details of the universe are obscure (Who is Raul Grange? What is the FUS? What is an ALBMU?). The mechanics of gameplay are as simple as *Magic*'s; you line cards up on opposite sides of the table and slug it out. In addition to attack and defense values, the "creatures" in *Chron X* have an armor value; it's a welcome concept, but the way it's implemented is needlessly clunky. Unlike *Magic*, unused resources accumulate, so there's a constant tension between immediately playing your cheap cards or saving up to deploy the heavy hitters. Although you can't play cards during the other player's turn, there are stealthy cards that can surprise your opponent by blocking apparently unopposed attacks. This adds a great fog of war feature that's impossible when you lay your cards on a real-world table. *Chron X* spans several virtual tabletops, each representing a separate city. The early game is a tense cat and mouse search across these tabletops for the other player's headquarters.

The way the cards are represented requires a choice between the stats or the graphics: newer players will have to relegate the artwork to stamp-sized inset boxes until they've learned all the cards. The quality of the artwork is occasionally cartoony, but on the whole a lot better than many paper-based CCGs. The game is strangely quiet, featuring only an occasional pling or snick as cards are moved around. It's not difficult to find opponents, but Genetic Anomalies' server is little more than a rudimentary chat room; it could use a discussion forum and a listing of who's online or playing in a game. The developers have done an admirable job supporting the game since it opened in July, and an expansion set should increase the number of cards from 200 to 350 by October.

Chron X is a dream come true for CCG players who can't easily find opponents. But more importantly, it's a good strategy game that skirts the widespread problem of poor AI: it plugs you into a growing community in excess of 1500 players, each with their owns decks and strategies. If the price to pay for this sort of solid, long-term, challenging, and open-ended gaming is that you can't actually touch your cards, it's well worth it. *–Tom Chick*





[clockwise from right]

The deck management screen can be divided into "piles", each sorted according to its own filter

Selecting a card brings up a larger image of it. However, until you're familiar with all the cards, you'll have to flip the image to get to the important information on the other side

The world's major cities each serve as a separate "tabletop" for a deploying cards; games can be global or limited to America, Asia, or Europe

★★★★☆

Chron X

Genetic Anomalies • www.chronx.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 486DX2/66 or higher, 8 MB of RAM, Internet connection • Multiplayer: 2 players

Chessmaster Live

A cozy place to find a game, twenty-four hours a day

It wasn't that long ago that many of us chess fanatics were excited when chess programs began to appear for personal computers. We were now able to play a game anytime of day. Little did we know a few years down the road we'd be able to play chess twenty four hours a day against people all over the world. This is possible with *Chessmaster Live*, and best of all the price is right: to an extent it's free.

Chessmaster Live is included in *Chessmaster 5500*. It is also available for free download at Headland Digital Media's dedicated website, www.chessmaster.com. After installing the program, players can log-on to its Internet site and play unlimited pick-up games under guest status without charge. Players can register as members for an annual fee of $39.99 for expanded access of the site.

CM Live has all the features for an enjoyable online session

The program is simple to use and contains all the features needed to enjoy an online chess session. There is a general chat area for finding opponents. When giving invitations for a game, players can customize the challenge to suit their tastes. This includes time allowed for moves, skill of opponents sought, and type of play. Games may be played in standard, bullet, or blitz forms. Spectators may be allowed to observe games in progress, or may be screened out for a private game. Games are automatically recorded in standard PGN format. There are various 2D & 3D sets to select for play.

There are many activities for registered members to enjoy. Players may earn ratings that are compatible with USCF standards. There are regular and even daily tournaments. Participants may find themselves on leaderboards or receiving player-of-the-week awards. Members have access to additional stylish chess sets.

Overall, chess enthusiasts will find much to like at this site. *–Chuck Klimushyn*

★★★★☆

Chessmaster Live

Headland Digital Media • www.chessmaster.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM • Mutliplayer: 2 players, Internet

Legal Crime

Byte Enchanters muscles in on the action

Legal Crime, a real time strategy game produced by Byte Enchanters Ltd (of Finland), puts the player in charge of a budding 1920s crime family. Set in America's gangster era, the shareware game ($20 registration) offers players a chance to pit their criminal minds against other cyber mafia bosses.

Hired gangsters who range from bat carrying thugs to submachine gun-wielding Thompson men secure your growing empire. Funding comes via extorting local merchants and, later, illegal businesses such as bootlegging, entertainment, gambling, and troubleshooting. The money generated across your turf is carried back to your headquarters by defenseless collectors. Your income can be spent on improvements or used to bribe the army, FBI, politicians, or the cops. While illegal businesses are the big money makers players can bribe politicians to have many businesses legalized, thus complicating matters.

The game focuses on multi-player, with very limited single player options; while this provides for clever opponents, the relative obscurity of the game means that you can't always find someone to play against. While fairly new, with time it might achieve a wider following. A few things taint game play, including the tendency of the gangsters to get distracted and forget what they are supposed to be doing. This, along with the inability to control collectors directly, can cause frustration. The game does appear stable and bug free (or at least close to it) and the "family" nature of small-time player Byte Enchanters Ltd means that games should have better luck getting a customer support hearing than might be the case elsewhere.

The Boys take care of business

Legal Crime's fast paced play allows for quick games which are fun if not uniformly captivating. If you've always wondered what Al Capone felt like, do yourself a favor: download the game from www.byteenchanters.com/download.html and try to muscle in on the action. *–Dan Waldeck*

★★★½☆

Legal Crime

Byte Enchanters Ltd. • ww.byteenchanters.com • Requirements: Windows 95, Pentium, 16MB of RAM, 14.4 modem • Multiplayer: 2-12 players, Internet

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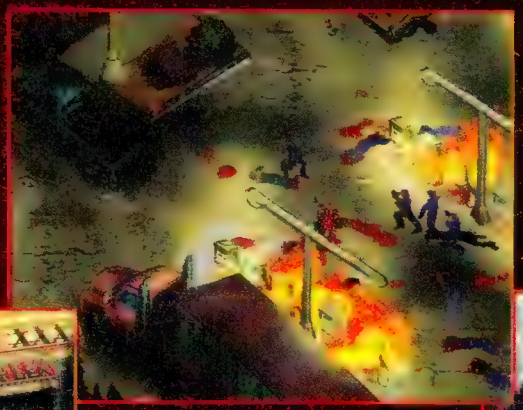
"ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL GAME EDITORS WE'VE EVER SEEN IN AN ACTION GAME"
Computer Gaming World

"POSTAL IS ONE OF THE MOST OUTRAGEOUSLY FUNNY TITLES I'VE EVER SEEN IN ADDITION TO THE GREAT GAME PLAY, TECHNICAL AND ARTISTIC FEATURES OF THIS GAME ARE EXCEPTIONAL."
AnyGame.com!

"SURE, SENSELESS VIOLENCE IS FUN. BUT IT'S EVEN MORE FUN WHEN IT'S DIRECTED AT MARCHING BANDS"
Computer & Net Player Magazine

* Brutal shotgun/napalm combo challenges you to keep one eye on your target and the other looking over your shoulder at all times.



* So freakin' real, your victims will actually beg for mercy and scream for their lives.

* Real-time 3D characters rage against beautifully hand-painted 2D killing fields.

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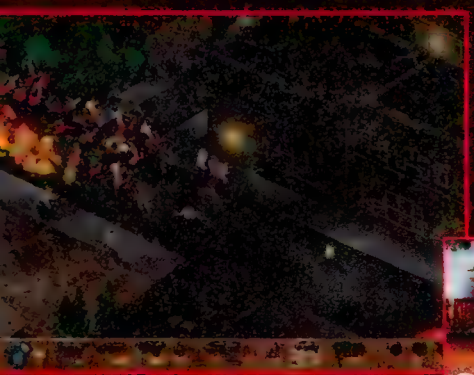
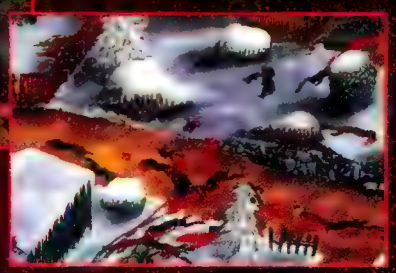
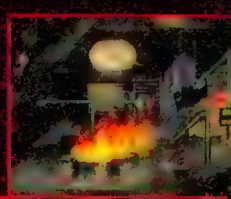
Winner of the Editor's Choice Award
EnterMedia.Net







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MATURE M AGES 17+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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Command Post

A strategy gaming peace process

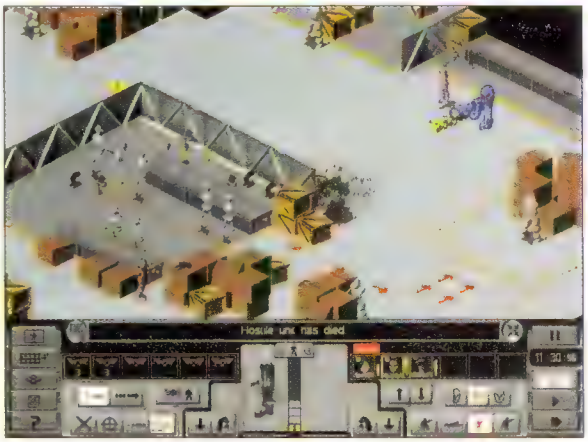
Molotov cocktails and rubber bullets, angry words and religious fervor… no, it's not the Middle East, but meeting between proponents of turn-based versus real-time strategy games (wargames, too). Few issues have so divided the strategy gaming community in recent years as this one. Largely over are the platform wars, the OS wars, and all the other piddly little design conflicts; now, instead, everyone's weighing in on whether strategy games should be turn-based or real-time (or "continuous-time"). Real-time has been winning of late, but turn-based still has a strong core of adherents. Little heard from are those (perhaps a majority?) that enjoy both types of gaming depending on the subject, the venue (solo play or multiplayer, for example), or their mood. No, these folks are silent (or shouted down); cries of "Can't we all just get along?" are ignored. Is there no hope? Will the war wage forever? Will nothing bring peace to this battered lan… err, to this field of gaming?

Well, yes – in fact, the process is underway. There are several proposals on the table, and several test plans have been floated by adventuresome developers. All hold some hope for ending the conflict – indeed, any combination of them might work too.

[clockwise from right]
It sounds like Interplay's M.A.X. II will give the gamers the widest range of play styles

Total Annihilation – one of several recent games that uses a useful pause feature to add leaven to the real-time mayhem

X-COM: Apocalypse is amazing in that it successfully implements both turn-based and real-time play in the same game

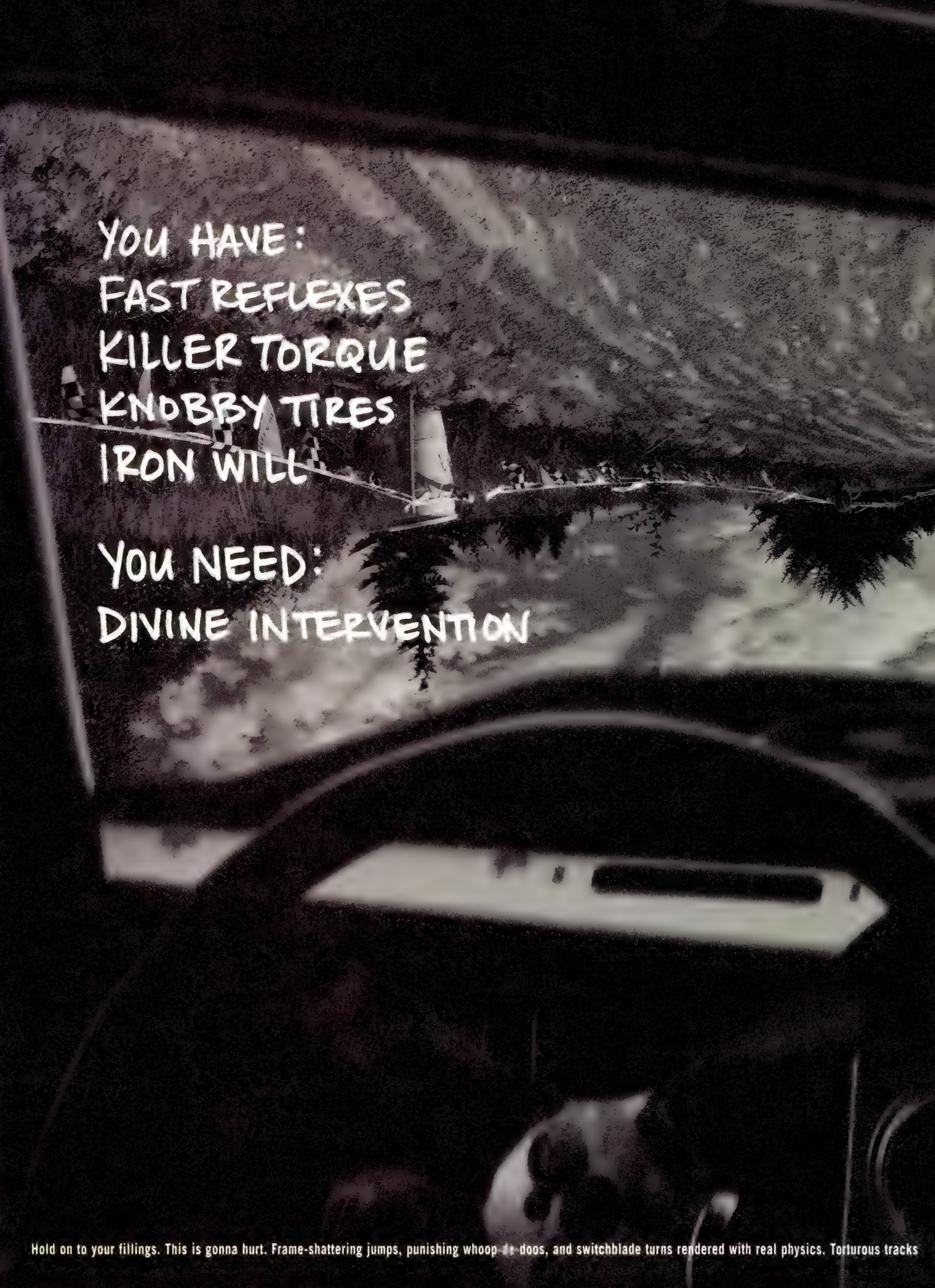


The first, and perhaps most obvious solution, is to design a game that can be played either turn-based or real-time. MicroProse's *X-COM: Apocalypse* did this and much to the surprise of both camps, succeeded. The problem with this approach is balancing the game, especially against AI opponents. In the case of *Apocalypse*, neither approach seems stronger in terms of gameplay, just different. Doing a game this way may also provide a side benefit for folks who like *both* forms of strategy gaming, namely that the game plays differently, that different challenges come to the fore and new tactics must be developed, thereby increasing replayability. It appears that other games are taking this approach as well; Interplay is adding real-time to *M.A.X. II* (in addition to the original's turn-based and simultaneous modes – see below), and apparently Sierra has decided to put some form of turn-based back into *Cyberstorm 2* (which had been shifted to wholly real-time, to the chagrin of some fans of the first game).

Other solutions to the problem tend to be variations on either turn-based or real-time. Many of the recent real-time crowd have sported a wonderful feature known as the Almighty Pause. No mere pause, wherein you can go to the bathroom but not affect gameplay, these pause modes let you (at least in single player games) issue orders to your units and buildings, plot waypoints, ponder the map, and only start up the action when you are ready. *Dark Reign*, *Total Annihilation*, and *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!* all include this function, and with luck more games will in the future. Why they haven't in the past is likely due to AI – if you actually give the gamer time to think, he or she might come up with some useful tactics, something most AIs can't deal with. This approach balances things somewhat – any gamer who's watched in frustration while the computer deftly maneuvered multiple tanks simultaneously should appreciate the chance to attempt to respond in kind.

Pause functions like this don't work well for human vs. human games, but they aren't as crucial there. Still, some gamers can just function faster than others in a real-time environment, so gamers might want to try some of the turn-based combinations instead. The original *M.A.X.* has what's called a simultaneous mode, wherein a period of action is played out in real-time, but once a side's units have used up a certain number of action points, their "turn" is over. A fast gamer might still have an edge, but can rarely get totally ahead of a slower gamer; also, the slower gamer might be so by choice, choosing to assault a rash opponent who's left him or herself dangling in the open. Another turn-based variation is used by the upcoming game *Worms 2*; it's still turn-based, but the turns are timed so there is a strong element of time-tension.

As of this writing, it sounds like *M.A.X. II* will have the best combination of the bunch: turn-based, simultaneous play, and real-time with an "Autolock" function to pause the game during play (hopefully you'll still be able to issue orders). Some of the other variations might not work as well, and some of the games' designs just might not support more than one approach (that *Apocalypse* could do both successfully is still pretty amazing), but it's encouraging that developers are trying to make their titles open to the widest possible range of gamers. *–Scott Udell*



Hold on to your fillings. This is gonna hurt. Frame-shattering jumps, punishing whoop-de-doos, and switchblade turns rendered with real physics. Torturous tracks

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On War

The deliberate attack

A Task Force (TF) conducts a deliberate attack when it is defeated in a Hasty Attack or determines that the enemy is too strong. Normally, it attacks as part of a brigade, but in many wargames, it attacks by itself.

Deliberate attacks are characterized by detailed information gathering, planning, preparation, and rehearsal (usually not possible in a wargame except by replaying the scenario repeatedly). The TF uses a large amount of supporting fire, and attempts to deceive the enemy as to the location and time of the attack. The TF attempts to attack enemy flanks or rear instead of conducting a frontal attack.

Organization

Deliberate attacks have three components: Main Attack, Supporting Attack, and Reserve.

The **Main Attack**, usually a single company team, penetrates the enemy position, destroys the force on it and seizes it. It receives the majority of support (air, artillery, engineer, air defense, etc.) available to the TF. These requests are answered first or supersede any other requests. (**Figure 1**, the tank company team on the right.)

The **Supporting Attack** fixes or suppresses an enemy force not being attacked by the main effort. Because of the range and lethality of modern weapons, they are attacked by fire instead of maneuver. (**Figure 1**, the companies on the left side of the figure.)

The TF **Reserve** is used to exploit the successful penetration of the enemy position to complete the destruction of the enemy force. Initially, it may be used to overwatch the main effort or add its suppressive fires to the overall effort. Normally, one company team is in reserve. (The left hand Mech Company on the right side of **Figure 1**)

Conducting the deliberate attack

A deliberate attack consists of three steps: isolate the enemy, destroy the enemy, and exploit success.

In order to isolate an enemy force, players (also seen in **Figure 1**):

- Use terrain to avoid enemy fires and exploit gaps in his defenses. This requires detailed map and ground reconnaissance to find, confirm, and use these areas.
- Use smoke to cover your own movement.
- Use artillery and mortars to suppress adjacent, supporting, or overwatching enemy forces (including the use of artillery delivered smoke), and
- Attack adjacent enemy units with direct fire or maneuver.

Notice that all the fires of the task force are being used to isolate one platoon from the rest of the position, and the initial assault targets a single enemy vehicle.

Next, to destroy the enemy, we use the principles of exploiting enemy weaknesses, minimize exposure of the friendly force, and use suppressive fires. Players:

- Recon the enemy's positions and determine its weak points, gaps, or other vulnerabilities. Find the position of enemy armored vehicles, anti-tank weapons, obstacles, covered routes into or around the position, and positions from which you can support the attack.
- Isolate the enemy unit where the TF will penetrate the larger enemy defensive belt.
- Breach or bypass obstacles to allow the TF into the defensive position.
- Penetrate the enemy position.

Additional techniques in attacking are:

- Use covered approaches to close with the enemy.
- Move forward mounted as far as possible, dismounting no farther away than the last covered and concealed position prior to the objective. If possible, dismount on or beyond the objective.
- Use fire and maneuver to attack the enemy from a favorable position.
- Don't stop in an exposed position – the enemy positions his kill zones to take advantage of clear fields of fire.
- Make the penetration on a narrow front. One company team concentrating on a single enemy platoon while the battalion's fire suppresses enemy supporting units.
- Don't allow gaps to develop between attacking units. The enemy can use these gaps to counterattack.

Finishing up

Finally, the initial penetration is widened and deepened by employing the steps above to isolate and destroy other platoon-size units in the enemy position. As the penetration is widened, additional units join the attack. (**Figure 2**, the Mech Company team is moving toward the gap.) The TF then completes the destruction of the enemy position as shown in **Figure 3**.

Next time, we will consider adopting the hasty defense, which is a necessary step in moving from a failed hasty attack or from the movement to contact to a deliberate attack when the enemy is determined to be too powerful to overrun with a hasty attack.

–Michael K. Robel

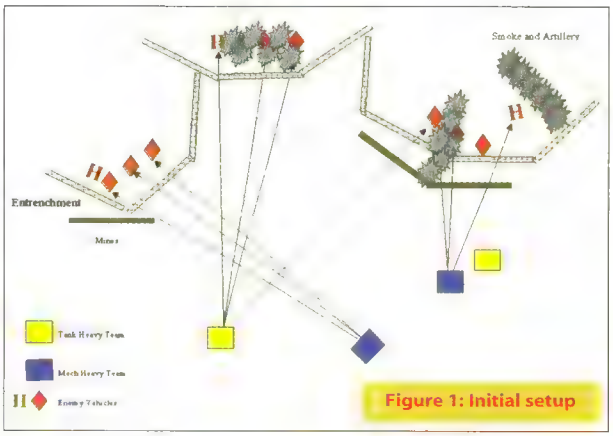

Figure 1: Initial setup

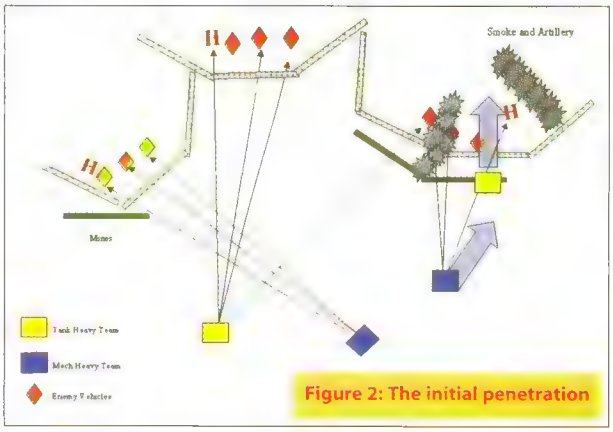

Figure 2: The initial penetration

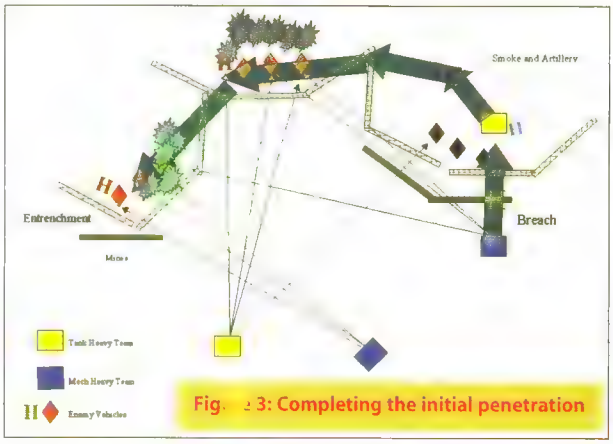

Figure 3: Completing the initial penetration

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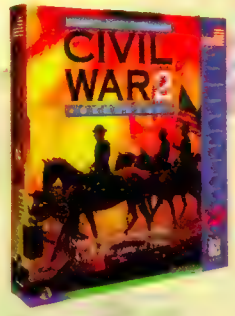
- Even more artwork from Mort Kunstler.
- New unit types include siege mortars, horse artillery, frigates and gunboats.
- New terrain includes forts, walls, swamps, water, major roads and coastline.
- Head-to-head play via modem, LAN, Internet and e-mail.
- Battle for FREE on Sierra's Internet gaming system.



Impressions

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Sid Meier's Gettysburg!

The master returns with a cannon blast of a game

COMPUTER GAMES STRATEGY PLUS STAMP OF APPROVAL

The day is finally here – the first all-new, wholly-Sid game in years has arrived (*Civilization II* was built on an existing design and didn't involve Meier as much as folks think, and *Magic the Gathering* was only partly his work), and what can we say but "Wow!?" Meier and the team at Firaxis have created something amazing, combining portions of wargaming, real-time strategy gaming, and some completely new elements into something that is, most of the time, one of the best wargame experiences in years, if not ever. Note, though, that "most of the time" – there are times when the game is not fun, some of them for a reason and some just depending on an individual's gaming tastes. No matter what your thoughts, though, you'll likely find *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!* a wonderful and even enlightening title.

Gettysburg!, of course, covers the famous battle of the U.S. Civil War that occurred in and around the small Pennsylvania town of that name on July 1-3, 1863. Though the fact that it covers a historical battle would get it labeled a "wargame" in the mind of most folks, it's nothing like most such games (the closest comparisons might be the old Swfte game *Gettysburg*, which is better as a multimedia learning tool than as a game, and Microsoft's *Close Combat*). Distributor Electronic Arts, trying to hook into the *Command & Conquer* craze, would like you to think that it's a "real-time action-strategy game" but, while it is real-time, it's nothing like *C&C*, *Warcraft*, and their ilk.

Meier and Firaxis would probably be happy if you just called it a game about Gettysburg, one that will appeal to the widest audience possible. If you're a hard-core adherent to either end of the spectrum, you may be disappointed. If you play your *Clone & Conquer* games in an arcade-like fashion, throwing masses of units about with little attention to strategy, and that's the *only* way you like to play, you'll find failure awaits you everywhere in *Gettysburg!*; this is a game that demands some realistic tactics. On the other hand, if you're an old school *grognard* wargamer used to "pushing counters" and direct control over every little detail of your forces, you may find the game's real-time nature, lack of hard data, and command emphasis off-putting. Then again, you may find you're like the rest of the strategy/wargaming world, in which case you'll be just plain amazed.

The game lets you take charge of either Union or Confederate forces in individual historical engagements, individual, pre-set

"War's not just hell, it's messy!" Even at close-in zoom Gettysburg can sometimes be hard to control due to a confusion of unit graphics

Altering the difficulty level from the easiest (seen here) ...

... to more difficult (with the "more units" option selected too) can give larger versions of the same scenario; pictured here is Picket's Charge

fictional actions, purely random battles, or a campaign game that can have any mixture of the three depending on your mood and the flow of the battle. Instead of recreating the entire three day battle in one huge game, Firaxis has broken the campaign down into many smaller scenarios that focus on the most interesting parts of the battle. The reasons for this are two-fold: first, they felt the majority of gamers wouldn't find the entire battle fun at the scale they're using (regimental/brigade), and second, a real-time recreation of the whole battle would rapidly become unmanageable (even with the game's pause function) at this scale.

The problem with this approach is that it sometimes gives the game a bit of a generic feel; while you can recognize an excellent recreation of Civil War combat in general, it doesn't always "feel" like you're at Gettysburg. Part of this is due to how the game treats the rest of the battlefield in any individual scenario. At the lower difficulty levels with "fewer units" selected, much of the map is empty of units, leaving you to think you're just a few brigades duking it out alone instead of a small part of several corps facing off. This also gives opportunities to maneuver that wouldn't have been there historically – flanks that were firmly protected in reality may now be wide open. At the higher difficulty levels with more units selected, you'll often find fixed units not under your control on your flanks. While this helps give the battlefield a more realistic populated feel, the only action is happening where you're at, which seems artificial. However, short of having the computer control these extra units for both sides (something that would be plausible given the game's outstanding AI), the gamer would have to control the activities of these extra units if he or she wanted the rest of the battlefield to "light up," and that would result in player overload. Caught in a Catch-22, Meier has made the best choice possible (although computer control of some friendly units to your flanks *would* be interesting, wouldn't it?).

Putting aside concerns about the campaign structure, *Gettysburg!* may be the best recreation of Civil War combat (or even just combat) of any game yet released. Sure, some of the hardcore data is missing, and Firaxis chose to eliminate supply issues, but it's amazing how realistic this game feels much of the time. The basic building blocks of the game are regiments of infantry and cavalry and batteries of artillery. While you can command each individual unit if you wish, the wise commander will make use of the brigade-level orders the game provides both because the real-time nature of the game makes micromanagement difficult and because cohesive brigade formations are essential to success (there is no equivalent to the "drag-select" of other real-time strategy games; a formless mass of units is a quick way to defeat in this game).

Regiments and brigades can be ordered into a variety of formations and issued several types of movement or defensive/offensive orders; often these commands can be queued, thereby reducing player workload. Unfortunately there are no waypoint commands (they would have been useful for setting up long road marches or flanking maneuvers), something that Firaxis' Brian Reynolds admitted (online) they didn't have time to get to.

The terrain you'll fight over includes Gettysburg and a large section of the surrounding area. Rendered in a isometric perspective, the map represents the relief of the battlefield quite nicely (this relief can be enhanced to give a better feel for heights). The map can be rotated in eight directions and scrolled; unfortunately, the terrain blanks when scrolling in single player, something that is initially quite distracting. Firaxis said this was done to give more CPU time to the AI, but as the AI seems to work just as well at the turbo speed setting this seems to be a dubious statement. Enough people have complained about this that Firaxis has already announced it will be made an option in an upcoming patch.

Okay, you've learned to command your troops and have looked over the battlefield; that's all well and good, but it's not where the game is. *That* comes when battle is joined, and it's here that the game shines most brightly. From the satisfaction of withstanding a direct assault to the horror of seeing an unexpected enemy column emerging from the woods on your flank (or, worse, to your rear!), *Gettysburg!* is perhaps the best game yet (on or off the computer) at recreating the feel of battle. Over and over you'll find yourself saying "So *that's* what it was like!" If nothing else, the game is a great educational tool.

Firaxis has also given us one of the best – if not *the* best – computer opponents in gaming to date. Without any apparent cheating, you'll be amazed at how the computer can maneuver units, picking out your weak spots and probing your flanks. Even at the lower difficulty levels the computer manages its forces the same – it's never dumbed down. Difficulty is instead set by adjusting the effect of morale (morale, a keystone in the game, is handled elegantly) on one side or another. While not explicitly stated in the manual, representatives of Firaxis have said online that the third level of difficulty has the forces approximately equal; levels one and two give a morale advantage to the human, while level four ("Lee" or "Meade" difficulty) makes the human's forces more "brittle" in combat.

Despite all the just praise that can be heaped on *Gettysburg!*, there are times when it just isn't fun; either because of arguable weaknesses or because of individual tastes. The weakness category may be best summed up by the phrase "War's not just hell, it's *messy*," for sometimes the game is just that. As fighting intensifies (especially when you're doing poorly), things can get confusing on the battlefield. Realistic? Absolutely. Fun? No; instead, it's often frustrating. This confusion is due in large part to the representation of the units on the battlefield; sometimes they can become quite a jumble, even at the highest zoom level. This does not always happen when you've mismanaged the battle; sometimes you've wisely placed units in close proximity to one another to hold a critical position, but you'll often pay for it in your ability to control them. With apologies to Firaxis' artists, an option to replace the animated unit representations with icons or even block shapes would have gone a long, long way towards alleviating player control frustration.

This close-in shot shows this Confederate brigade in a nasty situation—attacking uphill against a larger force protected by forest

Sometimes, though, the game just isn't fun for no definable reason – something that is obviously dependent on the individual. Personally, I didn't find it highly addictive like I did, say, *X-COM*, the kind of addictiveness where you just can't stop until you've finished. I instead found myself enjoying the game in smaller doses; trying to play for hours at a sitting gets to be too much. Of course, *X-COM* was a game that, once played through, got set upon the shelf; *Gettysburg!* is a game that will be played, a battle or two in a sitting, for a much, much longer time. *–Scott Udell*

★★★★½

Sid Meier's Gettysburg!

Firaxis • www.firaxis.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 60 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

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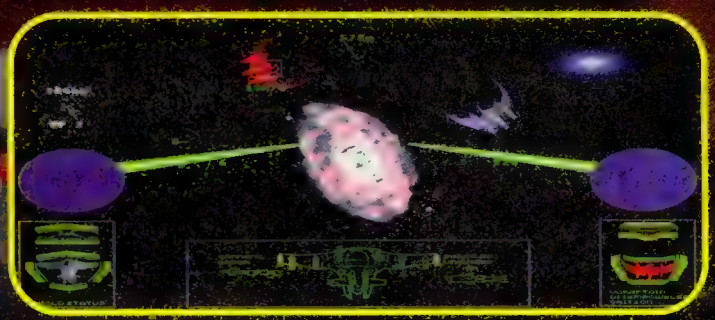

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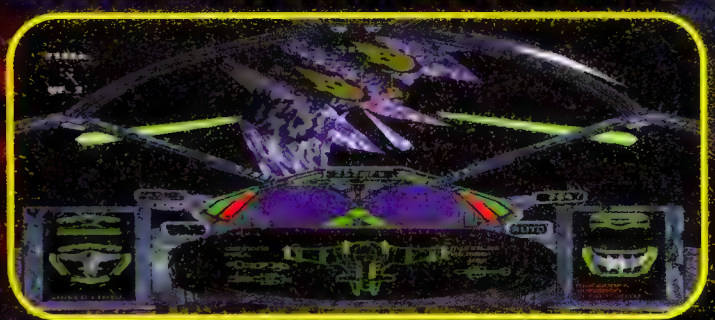

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Panzer General II

Panzer perfect

Ignoring the disproportionate size of troops to landscape, these exquisite maps look great

It takes a special brand of individual to be a computer wargaming *grognard*. First off, one must possess the ability to stare at cryptic orders like "X65-3DGNT" and instantly decipher that an Italian Alpini infantry unit is under heavy fire from mortars across the hill. One needs to master the art of looking cross during moments of intense amusement. Most of all, and perhaps best of all, the right to bear the name "*grognard*" requires the ability to completely and totally envelop yourself into the skill and art of war.

Most folks will never achieve *grognard* status, and for them, *Panzer General II* should more than satisfy any compulsion to recreate the epic struggles of World War II. As the catalyst used to unveil a new, vastly improved engine in the series, the game wildly exceeds expectations in almost every department.

Included in the game are over thirty battles in several campaigns. Unlike the original *Panzer General*, campaigns are playable from a German, American, British, or Soviet perspective. Scenarios range from the usual battles comprising Germany's famous Blitzkrieg to the final days of Berlin during the Soviet offensive. Due to a reduced map scale, the game focuses on key battles in concentrated geographic areas. Not only must players concern themselves with achieving victory, but also prestige (via richer, more full-bodied victories) to keep the momentum going throughout successive battles. A few lukewarm results early in the campaign spell almost certain doom. Resources tend to dry up quickly when the folks at the requisition desk hear you got pasted by Belgian Recon units during the last offensive.

At first glance, it would be so very easy to write off this title as just a glitzy sequel. To a point, that assessment has merit. However, further inspection reveals many subtle improvements and amenities that, when combined, put *Panzer General II* in the strategy forefront.

By now, most people expect high quality video and film footage to relay the introduction and mission briefings. Rest assured the game comes complete with those quintessential video vitamins and minerals (and yes, "batteries" are included). What gamers probably won't expect, but will be pleasantly surprised to discover, is the striking photo-realistic quality of the battle maps. Where most strategy games make do with abstract tiles depicting roads, rivers, and other terrain, *Panzer General II* utilizes sharp, pristine imagery that looks fantastic and feels seamless. It's much easier to visualize a convoy of troops heading up a valley when that valley flows naturally into the adjacent hills and plains, rather than several bite sized chunks of terrain pre-qualified as "valley" fodder. These maps fare *very* well when compared to actual geographic data denoting the section of the world they represent. Brave souls accustomed to using enlarged aerial photographs on the kitchen floor both to terrify feline entities *and* reenact war with their plastic army men (tip: pulverized *Cheetos* make great nerve gas) will find this title good enough to obsolesce at least one of those prior practices.

In conjunction with improved maps, animation of the individual units underwent considerable improvement. Each unit moves as one would expect: infantry goose-steps, tanks rumble across the landscapes (even facing the direction they're traveling now), and aircraft sputter along their intended flight plan. In keeping the focus on war and tactics, most of the glitz remains subdued enough that players won't feel bogged down by wait times while the same explosion routine runs its course for the umpteenth time. Beyond the eye candy, SSI did extensive work to distinguish similar units (a PzIVg compared to a PzIVF2, for example) on paper as well as visually.

For *Panzer General II*, SSI puts on a clinic in respects to its manual. With brief descriptions of campaigns and battles, a complete and informative guideline of general game

The famous Dunkirk evacuation. Move 'em out, pilgrims!

Terrain plays a large part in solving the tactical dilemmas in the game

Looks a bit confusing, but the icons offer valuable information about specific units

operations, and an exhaustive set of tables breaking down every unit from every country, the manual deserves special recognition. Hopefully, other companies will take note and upgrade their current manual design staffs with *breathing* members of society.

Numerous additions to movement and firing rules add welcome functionality to the inane scheme used in the original. Many of these new features were included because, quite simply, they make perfect sense. Units now move or fire in either order during a turn. Thankfully, players may move several units, *then* initiate fire with all of them. The newly introduced Recon class units ignore zones of control. Tanks possess overrun capabilities, lending them opportunities to steamroller several hapless infantry grunts in a single turn. Certain troop types even benefit from phased movement, allowing short hops rather than one giant leap per turn. By themselves, these features may appear minuscule, but the added allowances for movement and troop behavior garner a huge impact on the ease of coordinating assaults.

Say goodbye to the "buddy system," where artillery and supporting fire were forced to sidle right up to adjacent hexes of friendly forces. Ranges now vary from one to four hexes, and artillery can offer support from anywhere within their range. Tanks fire across several hexes if their line of sight isn't impeded by terrain. The claustrophobic scale of battle has eliminated strategic bombing; however, tactical bombers now provide the same turn-long suppression.

The most noteworthy addition involves the use of leader abilities. Officially, units who've been subjected to the harsh realities of war may spawn stout leaders with certain unique abilities borne of their tempering in battle. Unofficially, after a unit gains a hundred points (up to level five), the hidden pair of fuzzy dice inside your computer get rolled. If you win, the unit snags a special ability. Lose, and the fuzzy dice get munched by the power supply fan. Keep a broom handy.

The lengthy list of available advantages include higher movement allowances, entrenchment modifiers, back issues of *Mad* magazine to distract enemy troops weak in the Force, and even the ability to fire twice per turn. It's safe to say the game achieves greater replayability in that no two campaigns are truly alike. *Grognards* beware: adding this miniature role playing feature destroys any notion of technical accuracy (unless you believe in the shrapnel fairy), as suddenly Colonel Klink could quite possibly defeat General Rommel thanks to his newfound "*Chinese Checkers* Mastery" ability. Great for fans, bad news for fanatics, so to speak.

Not only does the AI appear more intelligent than before, it also seems to give itself a normal amount of prestige. You no longer find yourself in the unrealistic position of having to fight a more experienced army in the rear areas after destroying the "elite forces" on the enemy front lines. Beyond solo play, the game maintains a firm commitment to multiplayer, offering modem, network, and PBEM possibilities. To further reinforce replayability, a fairly comprehensive scenario editor allows the creation of individual battles, historical or wacky.

Don't worry, hard core wargamers. You can pull those old gripes about the original out of the attic, dust them off with a lint free cloth to avoid scratches, and they'll be just as applicable to *Panzer General II.* Plenty of room still exists for improvement, particularly to an interface which seems to have taken a lover's leap *backwards*.

Beyond intermittent technical glitches experienced on several machines, the main map view displays a smaller portion of the entire map than before. This could probably be chalked up to a narcissistic ploy to show off the tremendously detailed maps. Unfortunately, it forces players to toggle between the strategic and tactical maps too frequently. As well, the maps still seem as overexposed and washed out as a low shutter speed photograph taken of the sun.

Unit information comes at a premium. The game departs from the original one click information scheme into the treacherous "Carrot and Click" routine, requiring four clicks to finally get comprehensive information on a selected unit. Battle updates shoot on and off the screen like flash cards for Attention Deficit Disorder sufferers. Even details as basic as the weather now require additional scavenging through the menus to obtain. Worst of all, no easy method exists for determining composite sight ranges of your units. Welcome back to the thriving world of counting hexes (don't forget those hidden leader bonuses for sighting, either). The option to retain the *Panzer General* interface would have been a welcome, welcome sight.

Still, *Panzer General II* shows tremendous, yet strangely silent, improvement. Any mainstream gamer with a passive interest in the simple mechanics of war won't feel disappointed. Veterans of the original will enjoy the newfound freedom to truly position and coordinate troops realistically. *Grognards* should be ecstatic to hear what they were only going to believe anyway: that though there's more for them to love, there's just as much for them to hate. All told, the game offers solid value and longevity, even if Tanya isn't around to dash across the map blowing away armored divisions with a single shot of her .45. Disappointing, I'm sure, but sometimes sacrifices just have to be made. – *Tim Royal*

★★★★☆

Panzer General II

SSI • www.ssionline • Requirements: Windows 95, 90 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, play-by-e-mail

Where the hell...

the tap symbol and the mana ... Wizards of the Coast, Inc. All other trademar

THE CRITICS AGREE!

"MicroProse's game offers weeks to months of gameplay."
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PC Magazine, June '97
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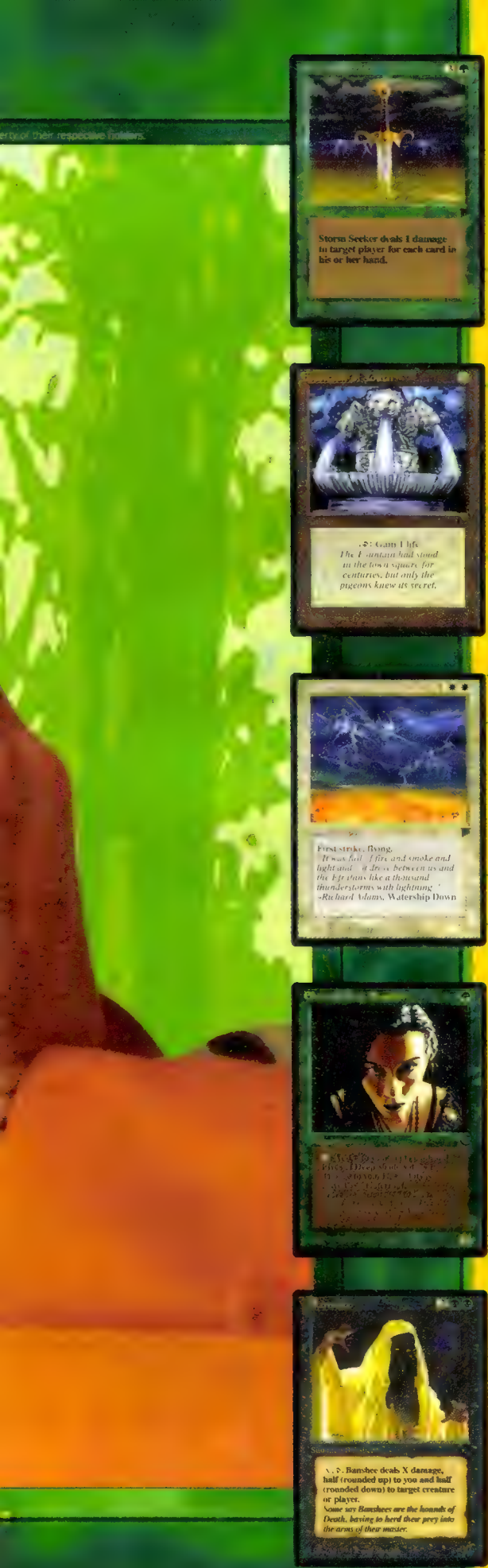
Newsweek, April '97

...did you get those cards?


Storm Seeker deals 1 damage to target player for each card in his or her hand.
First strike, flying.
"It was hail, fire and smoke and lightning. It drew between us and the fighters like a thousand thunderstorms with lightning."
-Richard Adams, Watership Down
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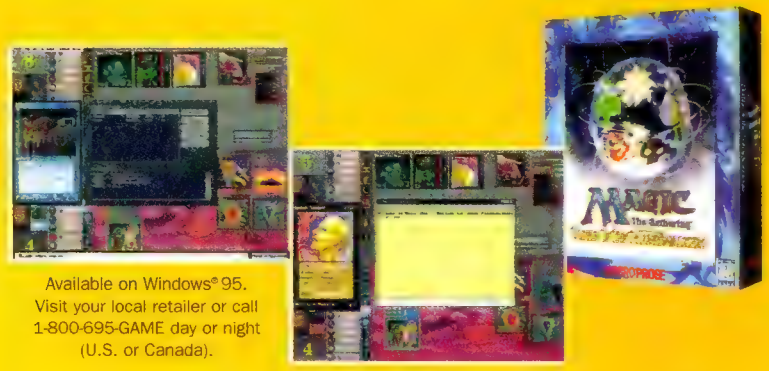

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Close Combat: A Bridge Too Far

Microsoft delivers a superb sequel

COMPUTER GAMES STRATEGY PLUS STAMP OF APPROVAL

Ambitious is the term that best fits *Close Combat: A Bridge Too Far*. An evolutionary sequel to a revolutionary game, Microsoft and Atomic Games weren't content to just package a new campaign and slap the *Close Combat* name on it. Their latest effort attempts to address every one of the criticisms of the original, and in doing so, *A Bridge Too Far* becomes a textbook example of not only how to do a sequel correctly, but to make an engrossing game as well.

While the underlying engine remains relatively the same, nearly every other aspect of the game has been enhanced or improved. In terms of visuals, gone are the drab, tile-based maps of old. In their stead are some of the most beautiful maps ever to grace a wargame. Hand-drawn and in 16-bit color, maps of Holland never looked so good. The slow scrolling and pixel-heavy zoom-in views of the original are also a memory, and welcome additions include features such as terrain elevations and multi-story buildings. During the tactical portions of the game, the battlefield comes alive with sight and sound. Each weapon has its own distinctive sound, and units and vehicles are animated well.

Graphics aside, the gameplay's the thing and at that, *A Bridge Too Far* excels. While some *grognards* complain about its real-time nature, the *Close Combat* engine is superb in simulating combat. Not the artificial, turn-based kind, but the combat that erupts in real-time, when decisions must be made under stress and duress. To keep the game from degenerating into a *Clone & Conquer* melee, where mindless drones march unquestionably to their deaths, the game uses psychological models of each individual soldier to guarantee that they act – and more importantly, react – as humanly as possible. The simple and intuitive interface shields the players from the considerably large number of calculations that the game performs each second. In many ways, *A Bridge Too Far* is as much a simulator as it is a wargame.

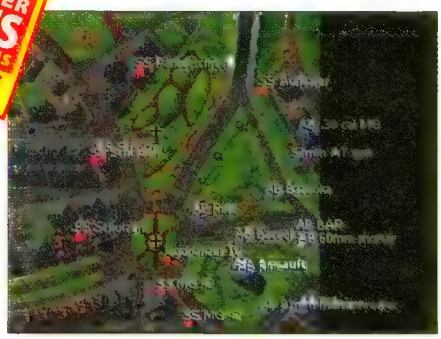
Atomic doesn't shy away from putting SS units in the game (they did play a critical role in Market Garden), and in addition to British and American forces, the Polish airborne show up as well. However, even with the plethora of new units and vehicles (flame-thrower teams are particularly welcome), you're still limited to what's on the map – there is no off-board artillery or air support to call in.

Players must still seize victory squares and inflict as much malice on the enemy as possible. A new twist in bridge battles is the count-down timer – take too long to secure the bridge as the Allies and you risk having it blown up in your face. Don't hold out long enough to wire the bridge as the Germans and you're likely to give the Allies a chance to cross the river, feet dry. The time element lends a whole new urgency to battles as cautious tactics are thrown over for desperate gambles.

The AI is fairly strong, and knows how to sneak units around flanks and counter-attack. More importantly, the static tactics of the original game (which made it easy to sit back and do relatively nothing) no longer work here. Sit still in one position for too long and you're liable to pay for it. Combat is fluid and, in the confined spaces of towns and villages, very bloody. Combined-arms tactics are a must, especially on the offensive. On the other hand, defense in depth is the order of the day when you've got to hold out.

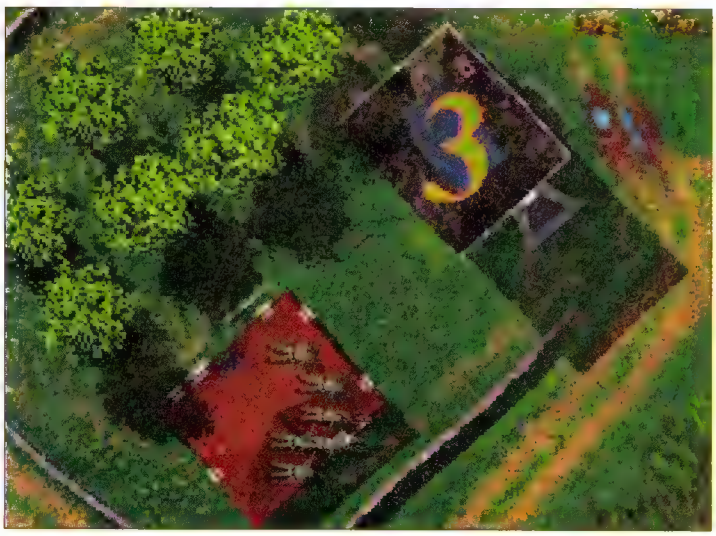
Overlaid upon the individual battles are the operational portions of the game. Because it is mainly a tactical wargame, *A Bridge Too Far* won't give you the type of control a dedicated strategy game would at this level. For example, you won't be able to choose where your battalions are deployed or where the battles will take place. Rather, the strategic considerations of the game deal mainly with resource allocation and supply. The map is divided into three sectors, and the game can be played through a number of different campaigns and operations. Though when playing the Grand Campaign, it's difficult to gauge the overall strategic situation as the game jumps between different battles in different sectors.

There's also something to be said for Microsoft's influence as well; from the well-written and informative manual to the quality production values (save for the hideous box art), there is very little not to like about this game. Market-Garden may have been too ambitious–*A Bridge Too Far* is ambitious enough.—*Jason Ocampo*



Face-off at the Nijmegen Bridge. The zoom-out view is useful for gauging the tactical situation

With a Panzer to the left, a Panzer to the right, and a Panzer in front, the Airborne unit holed up in Schtule's Farm is in trouble



Look Ma! No heavy pixelation this time as the zoom-in view shows U.S. paratroops crawling forward

★★★★½

Close Combat: A Bridge Too Far
Microsoft • www.microsoft.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90 MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM; MacOS, System 7.5, PowerMac, 16 MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

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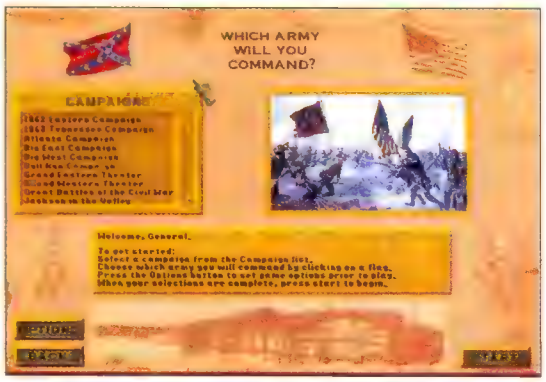
Civil War Generals 2

I wish I were in Dixie, again!

Naval units on patrol on the Mississippi

Take command of Sherman as he marches into Atlanta or fire on gunboats in the Mississippi in *Civil War Generals 2: Grant, Lee & Sherman*. This turn-based follow-up to *Robert E. Lee: Civil War General* features an expanded interface, more advanced rules, and cleaner play. With its first foray into the generals of the Civil War, Sierra left the battlefield a little bare, covering only seven battles and a single Confederate campaign. With the sequel, however, the battles are all-encompassing, with scenarios covering both sides of the war over the entire geographical region. *Civil War Generals 2* is the game the original should have been.



Campaign menu

As its name implies, generals are the key element in the game, commanding subordinates at the brigade and regiment level. This element sets it apart from a standard wargame, with much of the emphasis on unit morale and re-supply as well as normal battle tactics. Battles are limited to a set number of turns, with morale wins and the holding of key hexes or defeat of key units the basis for victory or defeat. In campaign play units progress from battle to battle, adding replacements for the killed or injured; the player is even given options to upgrade units' weapons or transfer officers.

Playing the original was almost a chore; some of this "work" has been removed in the sequel, making it a more pleasing experience. An undo feature, sorely lacking from the original, now graces the interface, though rightly working only when moving or making formation changes. The map has an added zoom option that makes it much easier to recognize your units and check the field of battle. The addition of new units adds immensely to the game as well. Engineers now built bridges or destroy forts, gunboats cruise the waterways, and horse artillery join the forces. Forts guard key locations while swamps and oceans add variety to the landscape.

What really sets this apart from the original, however, are the actual battles. From naval warfare at Vicksburg to heavy fighting in Atlanta any region may be contested with the

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Scenario editor

choice of Union or Confederate sides. Besides the 40+ scenarios taken straight from history over 150 alternate-history battles may also be waged. The 17 campaigns range from the entire Civil War to specific areas (Shiloh or The Wilderness) or even entire fronts (Western and Eastern). Also included is a full-featured scenario editor to either create your own historical battles or bring the Civil War to your hometown.

Gameplay has been improved with more realistic rules. Victory locations, a nebulous concept in the original, now appear on the map and show the areas that are vital to either side. Rules have been fortified during combat by adding "zones of control," preventing unrealistic disengagement when enemy units are nearby. Indirect fire for certain artillery and additional rules for the new units make this a more complex game, but still playable for beginners. The AI is much improved and should give the hard-core wargamer a better challenge.

Though many of the problems inherent in the original game have been fixed there are still some minor annoyances that detract from the game. It would be nice if the results window after a battle would show the names of the units that had actually fought. In large scale battles the overland map consumes too much screen space (an 800x600 screen resolution would be perfect for this game). A tutorial video is included, but it's way too short and imparts only limited information, raising the question of why they bothered with it. The play-by-email function is not in the initial release, but according to the README file Sierra is working on a patch that will be on their web site soon.

For anyone interested in gaming the Civil War, *Civil War Generals 2* has all the right ingredients: multimedia references, good graphics, multiplayer capability and a vast array of battles. Though still a little on the weak side for a master tactician, there is marked improvement from the original and it should appeal to most wargamers. So limber up the artillery, saddle the horses, pack your rifles and head to war. *–Jim Pedicord*

General Lee's troops advancing on Washington D.C.

Battle in the forests of Tennessee at Shiloh

★★★★☆

Civil War Generals 2: Grant, Lee & Sherman

Sierra • www.sierra.com • Requirements: Windows, 486/66 or higher, 16MB RAM, 2X CD ROM • Multiplayer: 2 players, Internet, LAN, modem, hotseat

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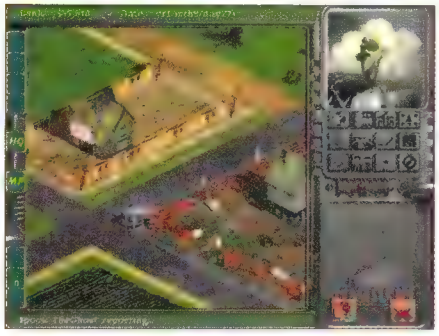
Constructor

Solid construction with a few bent nails

Think you've got what it takes to be a successful real estate developer? [nod your head, tough guy] Then take charge of a work gang, money, a plot of land and aspire to greatness! *Constructor*, developed by System 3 and published by Acclaim, has the "look and feel" of a Bullfrog, *Theme*-type game with its funny, cartoonish, construction-oriented gameplay. There's a bin-load of social commentary, poking fun of stereotypes about hippies, tenants, and local government; throw in a generous selection of ominous characters like nasty clowns, ghosts, crooks, psychos, mobsters, Mr. Fixit (let's just say his fix-it skills are similar to Tim Allen's of *Home Improvement*) and things get pretty crazy.

There goes the neighborhood!



Tenants abandoned this house because of their ghostly neighbors!

The gameplay is similar to real time strategy games – you've got units with experience and damage levels, resources (wood, cement, brick, steel), and plenty of construction. The first thing you notice are scurrying people, walking in awkward 90 degree angles. Quickly getting beyond that, you survey the zany atmosphere – it's fun to watch urban activity. Tenants, for example, might include little Junior picking his nose and someone practicing karate in his yard.

The interface is colorful, lively, and quite functional, making it unlikely you'll need to peck at the keyboard. However, more information could have been placed on the main screen. More than one zoom mode would have been useful – there is a full map view but something in between would have been nice. The game's graphics are very good, accompanied by quality sound effects.

It's truly sadistic enjoyment to make your opponent miserable. Let's see...you can harass, scare, beat, and kill his tenants, steal from them, set their houses of fire, capture buildings, build on his property, and force his people to dance to your hippie music (even when they have better things to do)! Keep in mind, these actions can (and will) be reciprocated by your bloody rude opponent.

The tenants you start with ain't that great but they're all ya got

Don't dismiss tenants and council members because they can make or break you. The council adds to the game but there should be more variety and randomness in council demands. As it is now, the missions are scripted – doing X sets off Y. Yes, this makes it easier for play-balancing but isn't too exciting after a while. As for the tenants, they are an assorted bunch with one similarity – complaints. Some complaints are funny: "My neighbor's got a problem – like his house is on fire –and the smoke is starting to bother me!" You could evict the tenant but some curmudgeons occasionally refuse to leave and won't pay rent.

You're not going to learn much from the Quick Start tutorial in the manual but it fulfills its purpose for novice gamers. It's a tribute to the interface and game design that most gamers can probably muddle through without consulting the manual, but some nagging questions will force you to keep it handy. Although there could be more screen shots and detail in the manual, it's surprising to find a few pages of charts at least at the end.

A few annoying splinters stick into you during the game. One, the repairmen you hire do not alter their rounds to put out a fire – you may have to repair it manually. Be diligent about this because once a single explosion took out more than half a city, screams and smoldering bodies everywhere (time to reload that last save!). Two, oftentimes there's just too much going on, making it frustratingly difficult to be on top of everything. Three, the combat options are extremely basic (move and fight) and it's tough to pull out a dying worker in the middle of melee.

Constructor can be played on a network, modem, or direct link by up to four human or computer opponents. Three difficulty levels are provided along with various maps. The AI is competent and provides a good overall challenge. However, it sometimes ignores your takeover efforts and does not pursue your units actively.

Although having much in common with other real time strategy games, *Constructor* brings a refreshing perspective to the theme. Long term playability is questionable because of predictable council missions, limited number of main missions and maps, and lack of built-in scenarios. With that said, *Constructor* provides hell-raising antics and buffoonery. Oh, and don't forget to wear your hard hat! *–Michael Bowen*

★★★½☆

Constructor

Acclaim • www.acclaimnation.com • Requirements: DOS, 486/66 or higher, 8MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM; Windows95, 75MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, LAN, modem, serial connect

Buccaneer

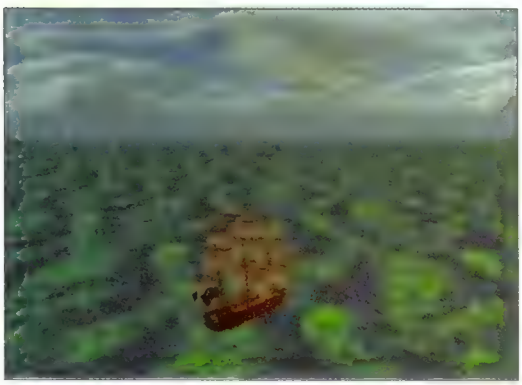
Swashbuckling fun in the best tradition of Pirates

Raiding the Caribbean on the computer has been dominated by the game *Pirates* since most of us were gaming on Apple II computers. There have been many failed attempts to improve upon that game. *Buccaneer* succeeds in bringing a long needed, entertaining update to flying the Jolly Roger.

Buccaneer allows players to engage in a campaign game, ship-to-ship engagements, or multiplayer combat. The campaign game expands on the standard formula of the genre by allowing the player to pick one of six characters, each with a separate storyline. All the individuals have their own subplots and branching storylines with mutiple endings, and you'll attempt to trade goods, keep crew morale from reaching mutinous levels, and build a reputation. In port, veteran pirates will be right at home. The usual options of visiting pubs, supply houses, shipyards, and meddling governors are all present.

A man and his gun; the bigger, the better

Combat is the mainstay of the game. The sailing vessels are beautifully rendered, though the battles are definitely arcade-oriented. The ships seem to be moving at sixty knots and respond like PT boats (thankfully, there is an option to slow down the action). Reload rates will make you think someone invented and installed "gattling-cannons" on your ship. While you can't pick various shot types, you can target hull, masts or sails specifically. You also have the option of going to the gun-deck to handle the long guns yourself.

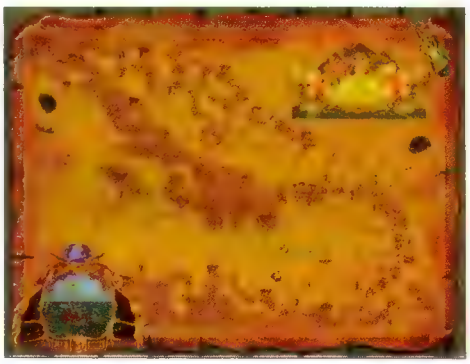


If you look closely you can see ant-like sailors climbing the rigging to unfurl the sails

Realism aside, combat is rather fun. Players will take guilty pleasure in going to the gun-deck and pounding cannon shots into their unfortunate prey. Multiplayer encounters are essentially *Buccaneer* "deathmatches," with ship-to-ship combat only.

The game is a bit touchy with various video-cards and drivers. Owners of Hercules Stingray 128/3D cards will have problems with the game. Hopefully a patch will correct these glitches.

Despite these quibbles, *Buccaneer* is worth a look to those longing to live the life of a rogue in the West Indies.
–Chuck Klimushyn



The Caribbean is yours to plunder

★★★☆☆

Buccaneer

SSI • www.ssionline.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 120 MHz Pentium, 16MB, 4X CD-ROM • Mutliplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

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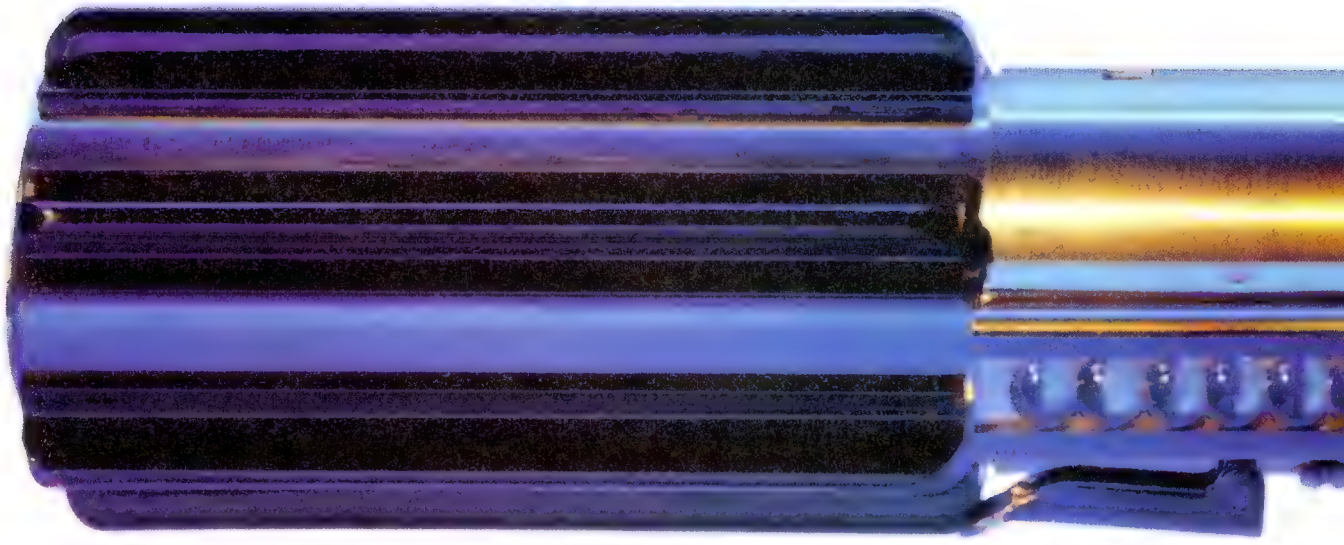

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www.lucasarts.com

Waterworld

Blub... blub... blub...

Interplay deserves critical acclaim for bringing the authentic feel of an empty movie theater right to computer desks everywhere with *Waterworld*. The game mixes the premiere tactical elements of *Jagged Alliance* with the depth and complexity of *Homey D. Clown*. The cut scenes feature some of the most available talent in Hollywood. They ponder, they wander, they even don native headdress (though with visible discomfort).

Prices? Naw, we don't need no stinkin' prices

Let's see. Oh yea, the good points. The mission briefings feature decent narration and a pictorial representation of objectives. Hot keys help prioritize and coordinate squads into manageable groups.

Now for the bad. Information about weapons and items remains out of reach when it's most needed. The trading screen fails to show prices. Lucky gamers click an item, listen to the annoying buzzer and see a quick glimpse of the price. Didn't catch it? No problem. Click again, and look faster this time.

The game transpires in double time. With a stopwatch in hand and no human interference, one particular mission ended in failure in exactly 5.3 seconds. Stripped of any tactical coherency at this rushed pace, managing troops forks off into two directions: Make a giant group and shuffle them around the decks, or split squads off, post them high above, and watch them slaughter the brain dead computer enemies.

In a brilliant stroke to prove just how hip game designers can be, almost every squad member screams "BITCHIN!" when clicked on. Click to attack a Smoker. "BITCHIN!" Click to grab an unidentified object of unimaginable worth. "BITCHIN!" Click to throw the lever on the amazing and futuristic Ronco Water Weasel. "BITCHIN!" Imagine educational companies relaying such profound literary expression in the next *Freddi Fish* installment.

Waterworld deserves a spot on your shelf. Any title next to it instantly looks great. Its inspiring prose outperforms the average junior high school yearbook. It might not be your destination, but this "dry land" has all it needs to be your next *Destiny*. If for no other reason, buy it to preserve its constitutional right to be "BITCHIN!" *–Tim Royal*

★☆☆☆☆

Waterworld

Interplay • www.interplay.com • Requirements: DOS, 90MHz Pentium, 16MB RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

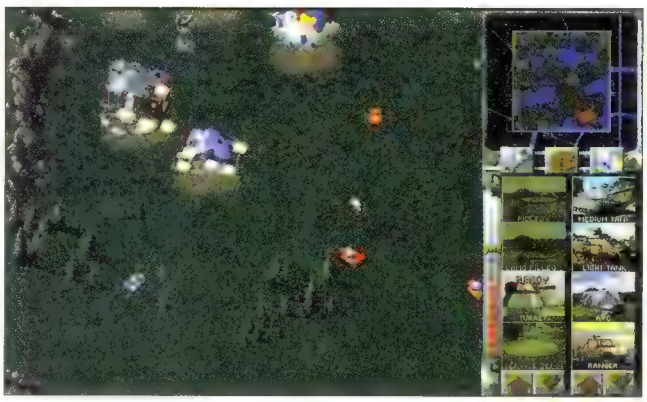
Red Alert – Aftermath

The end of the tank rush?

Whenever a game is a hit, it usually has an expansion pack. So if a game has two expansion packs, does it mean the game is a major hit? It could – or it could mean that the second add-on merely fixes the shortcoming of the first. Such is the case with the latest addition to the *Command & Conquer* epic: *Aftermath*.

The biggest complaint people had about *Counterstrike*, *Red Alert*'s other expansion pack, was the inability to use new units in multiplayer games. With the gaming industry becoming more and more Internet oriented, this was a serious disappointment to many *Red Alert* players. That criticism has been addressed in *Aftermath* – all units are multiplayer capable. Gamers now can send a nuclear-armed Demolition truck or jump a Chronotank into the middle of an enemy base. Shock Troopers carry miniature Tesla coils and there is a field mechanic to repair damaged vehicles. So, with new units to alter the balance of the game, are the days of tank rushing finally at an end?

Almost, but not quite. The new units are expensive and slow to build; they simply aren't as cost-effective as the good old medium tank… with a few possible exceptions. The introduction of an infantry unit, the Shock Trooper, that can't be run over by tracked vehicles is good; tanks are ineffective against it. The player who build a bunch of tanks early in the game and attacks will still probably win, but longer games may give rise to serious use of new units. Another improvement to multiplayer is the introduction of enormous maps, cleverly called Mega Maps. Players can start extremely far apart, setting the stage for a completely different kind of battle.


Demolition Trucks can wreak havoc in an enemy base – if you can get one there

While there are some improvements to multiplayer, the single-player end of things is pretty weak. There are 18 new missions, but there is no plot line to string them together. *Aftermath* offers some nice additions, but may not be for those without human opponents. *–Ryan Brush*

★★★☆☆

Command & Conquer: Red Alert—Aftermath

Westwood Studios • www.westwood.com • Requirements: Command & Conquer: Red Alert

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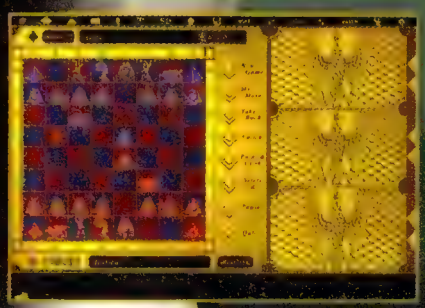

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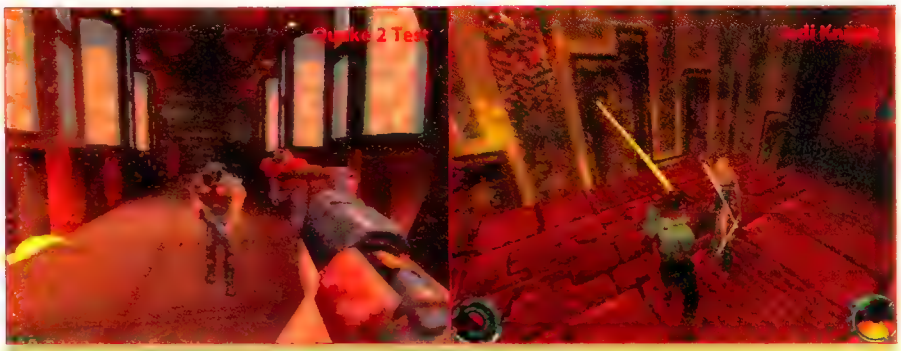
The War of the Engines®



The War of the Engines– Quake 2 Test vs. Jedi Knight

I was all set to write a column about the great wars between the *Quake II Test* and *Jedi Knight*, perhaps quoting some of the combatants in what may very well be the War of the Roses for the 90s. But after pouring through maybe a thousand online messages, it suddenly struck me – I don't have a clue what these people are arguing about.

When did engines become the story rather than the game design? When did gameplay become secondary to polygon-pushing? When did native 3Dfx vs. Direct3D become more important than more-of-the-same vs. innovation? Just why do people play 3D action games anymore? To enjoy a beautifully designed level or marvel at colored lighting?

I'm as impressed as anyone by technical innovation – much of the praise directed at *Quake* when it was reviewed was reserved for that aspect of the game. But a game like *Tomb Raider* is a superior *game* not because of its technology, which is decidedly inferior to *Quake*'s, but because of its gameplay.

Rather than get into an argument over *Jedi Knight* vs. *Quake II* vs. *Tomb Raider* vs. *Tomb Raider 2*, let's open the floor to what you, the readers, are interested in seeing in your games. I'll give you some of my own thoughts. I don't want technical innovation at the expense of gameplay. You can keep your lens flares and colored lighting effects if they negatively impact my frame rate or add nothing to gameplay (both *could* enhance a game if used correctly, but most implementations are done just for their "cool" factor). I'd love to see better AI for bad guys, more interesting multiplayer options (c'mon, another deathmatch?), a weapon that's not a shotgun, defensive gameplay options (the tripwire in *Duke Nukem 3D* was a good start – more of that kind of stuff), traps, lots of interactivity with the environment, interesting plots and all sorts of other nifty features. Level designs and sound effects are already pretty good for most games, so work on some of the secondary elements. Basically, the little things that tend to make or break games.

Of course you're sitting there going, "Well duh. Of course you want gameplay. That's what we all want." Well, reading some of those messages from people saying they hate *Jedi Knight* because it has "lame" explosions leaves me wondering.

So let's hear it. What do you want to see in your upcoming games? Is there any 3D action game you're particularly looking forward to because it innovates in some area? Operators are standing by at sbauman@cdmag.com. *–Steve Bauman*

CHEATER

Jedi Knight

From the console, accessed in solo games by pressing <T>, type:

THEREISNOTRY	Skip level
WHITEFLAG	Disable AI*
DEEZNUTS	Increase force level
ERIAMJH	Fly
JEDIWANNABE	God mode*
RED5	All weapons
WAMPRAT	All items
YODAJAMMIES	Increase mana
RACCOONKING	Super Jedi
IMAYODA	Master light Jedi
SITHLORD	Dark Jedi
5858LVR	All map
SLOWMO	Slow motion*
PINOTNOIR	Restart level*

*Follow up the code with a 0 for off, or a 1 for on.

Take No Prisoners

From the console, which can be accessed by pressing <SHIFT ~>, type:

JUGGERNAUT	God mode
WRAITH	No clipping

Shadow Warrior

At any time, press <T> and type:

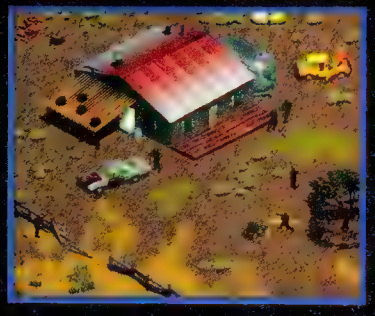
SWCHAN	God mode
SWGIMME	All items
SWGREED	All cheats
SWSAVE	Saves map to disk
SWTREKxy	Warp to episode X, level Y
SWRES	Change resolution
SWSTART	Restart level
SWGHOST	No clipping
SWMAP	Automap
SWTRIX	Bunny rockets
WINPACHINKO	What is says
SWNAME	Change your name in multiplayer
SWLOC	Framerate

IF GUNS FAIL, BRING IN DOGS.

IF DOGS FAIL, BRING IN TEAR GAS.

IF TEAR GAS FAILS,

BRING IN HELICOPTERS.



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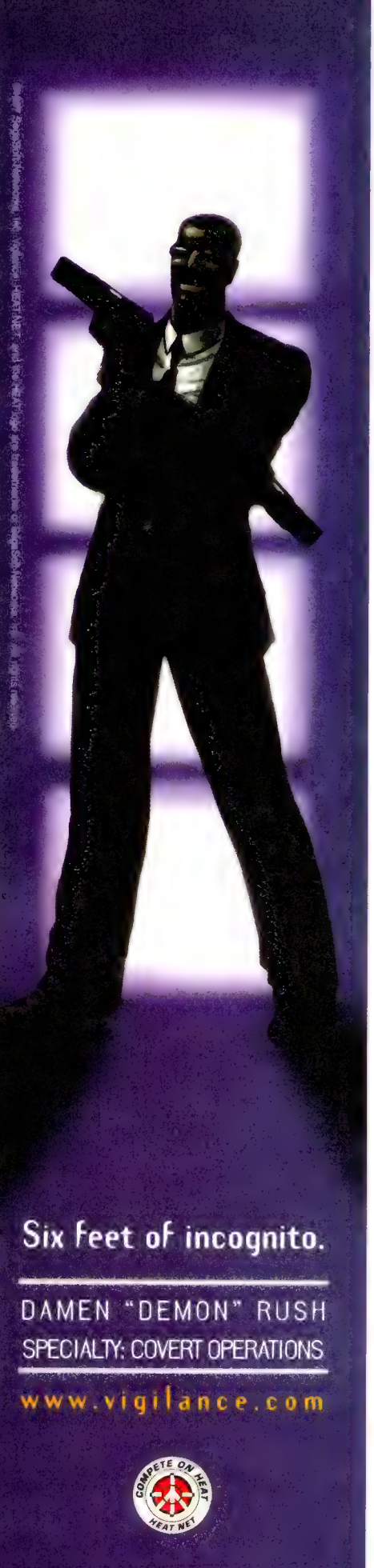
TEEN T

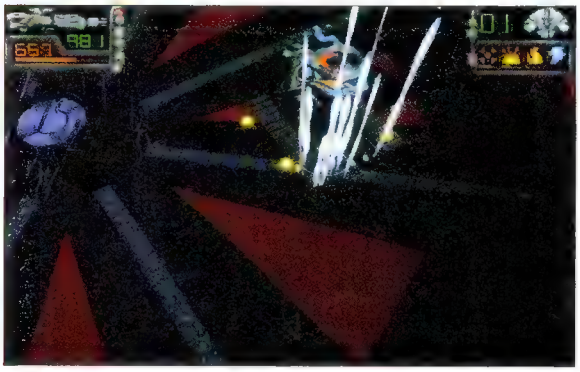
IF HELICOPTERS FAIL,

BRING IN THE NEGOTIATION TEAM.



Take No Prisoners

Duke Nukem returns to 2D



Taking out Rhoid

From its wasteland-esque setting to the "man of few words" monosyllabic grunts of the principle character Slade, *Take No Prisoners* shamelessly copies *Duke Nukem*. That it manages to succeed despite revisiting a tired formula is a testament to the mimicry skills of developer Raven Software, whose *Heretic* and *Hexen* managed to re-do id Software's games and make them feel new and unique.

The setting is San Antonio, TX, reduced to one of those typical post-nuclear wastelands full of the usual assortment of religious zealots, nerds and yuppies. OK, so being attacked by guys in tennis outfits practicing their lobbing technique using grenades while saying "my serve" is somewhat unique.

The wisp of a story is told through an opening and closing cut scene and the logs of various people you'll kill during the course of the game. The overall goal is to break into a protective dome and retrieve the crystal that powers it – what you choose to do with it determines which of the two ending cut-scenes you get to watch.

The fundamental gameplay is identical to every other 3D shooter currently on the market, only *Take No Prisoners* eschews the fashionable first-person 3D for a top-down view of the action. While the viewpoint limits your view of distant objects and enemies, it allows you to manage attacks from all directions. It's too bad Raven didn't take this to the next level, offering true line-of-sight so you could only see things you were facing.

The 2D sprite-based characters are a bit bland looking but the environments themselves, rendered in 3D, are exceptionally well-detailed. Unfortunately, it comes at a price – the engine, developed in-house by Raven and supporting Direct3D, is sluggish on a 133MHz Pentium with a 3Dfx card. Perhaps it's Direct3D that's causing the mediocre performance, but there is a certain bit of irony that a 3D game made to look like a top-down 2D game turns out to be slower than a true-3D game like *Quake*.

As with Raven's other games, *Take No Prisoners* doesn't use the "go through level, press button to advance" paradigm. Instead, you can travel between 20 different locations (levels) via rail, sewer boats,

Dude, like, you'll find Biff inside. Totally

Torching the bad guys

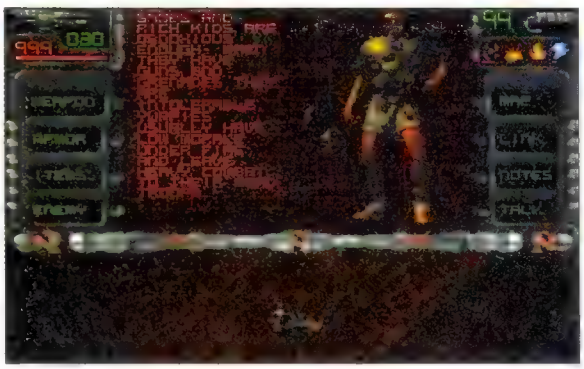
or trucks. You'll occasionally have to discover passwords or solve puzzles to enable vehicles that travel to other locations. While the game feels non-linear, you have to do certain things in a certain order. The overall structure of the game occasionally makes it suffer from the "wandering gamer" syndrome – you'll often find yourself traveling from location to location trying to figure out what to do next.

In keeping with the game's *Duke Nukem* approach, almost every item in the game can be destroyed. See that chair in the office? Blow it up. Did that toilet give you a funny look? Blow it up. Was that plant talking about you behind your back? Blow it up. Glass breaks, piles of garbage turn into smaller piles of garbage, wood explodes into tiny toothpicks, and holes appear in walls (usually uncovering secret areas for extra goodies). Mass destruction is great fun, and as silly as it may seem, adds a lot to the game's appeal.

Also helping things along are vehicles and devices you can control. You can drive cars around, pilot sewer jet skis (or something like that) and fly around in hover cars armed with lasers and plasma launchers (great fun at parties). The game is quite violent, with more squirting blood and exploding bodies than the more "controversial" *Postal*. The weapon selection is fairly standard, ranging from shotguns to flamethrowers to rocket launchers to a special weapon that can only be used at the very end of the game.

The game supports a number of interesting multiplayer modes, from "capture the flag" to "assassin," where each player is assigned another to kill. Most of the games are playable over the Internet via the Red Orb Zone, but a lack of available online players kept this feature from being tested.

While the performance issues and the occasional visual glitch or stuck character occasionally scream "contractual obligation" (Raven was purchased by Activision before completing the game for Red Orb), *Take No Prisoners* gets better the more you play it. It has that odd "I gotta finish it" feeling that all good action games have, constantly pushing you to the end even when you know the story payoff is likely to be lame. The real payoff is newer, better environments to explore (the MastaMall is particularly amusing) and the gratification of completing a well-designed game. While it may be overlooked sitting next to copies of *Jedi Knight* and *Quake II*, *Take No Prisoners* is definitely worth capturing. *–Steve Bauman*



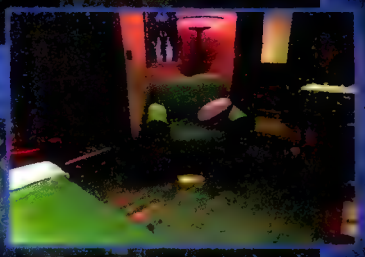
Yuppies. I hate those guys

★★★☆☆

Take No Prisoners

Red Orb Entertainment • www.takenoprisoners.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 100MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet (2 players), LAN, modem, serial

Black
Dahlia



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Postal

Guilty of utter mediocrity

"76 trombones led the big parade..."

We live in a deeply cynical world, one where a desire to live a public life drives us to extremes. From daytime talk-shows to reality television, what was shocking yesterday becomes the mundane after repeated viewings.

Postal reaches new highs, or lows, in its attempts at courting controversy and shocking gamers. It's positioned itself as a daring piece of software by renegade developers, and the mainstream press became unwitting accomplices in the media event of 1997, the *Postal* World Tour™. But stripped of its hype, what's most shocking about the game is its mediocrity.

The story of a guy who loses it and starts killing everyone, *Postal* is an overhead shooting game with hand-painted backgrounds and what appear to be sprite-based characters. It's not exactly cutting edge stuff, and attempts at adding transparent smoke and lighting effects has produced a game that really wants a 200MHz MMX processor in order to drive a 2D 256 color game that scrolls in four directions.

What the mainstream press has focused on is the violent content in *Postal*. Though it is violent, it's only shocking to the person who's never played *Syndicate* or *Crusader: No Remorse* or any of the other graphically violent games that have graced our hard drives over the years. Which leaves you with the one daring thing in *Postal* – the sound. People beg for their lives, and for the first couple of levels, it is a bit disturbing. After that, though, the repetitive nature of these sounds effectively dulls their ability to shock.

Once over the violence and sound you start to focus on the gameplay, and that's when things start to go really bad. The controls are awkward and not particularly smooth, you can lose your character behind objects and buildings and the environments aren't particularly interesting. All in all, it's a boring game.

But it'll sell a lot of copies because the makers know what we want. We want controversy. We want things that are forbidden, that are bad for us. But *Postal* ultimately isn't controversial, and those looking to blame it for society's ills are missing the point. It's not guilty of ruining society – it's guilty of being a bad game. *–Steve Bauman*

★½☆☆☆

Postal

Ripcord Games • www.ripcordgames.com • Requirements: Windows 95 or NT 4.0, 90MHz Pentium, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM; MacOS, System 7.x, 100MHz PowerPC or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-16 players, Internet, LAN, modem

Virtua Fighter 2

Sega strikes again with a smashing sequel

The once king of the coin-op fighters finally hits the PC

The hard hitting action is still hard to beat

After Sega's impressive translation of *Virtua Fighter* to the PC last year, their conversion of the sequel was highly anticipated. It's finally here and it is, for the most part, the same *Virtua Fighter 2* fighting fans have come to know and love over the last couple years. Given the dismal state of fighting games on the PC, *Virtua Fighter 2*, despite its age, is a welcome addition to the genre. This has been since its inception one of the finest brawlers ever made, and the solid playability is here as well, as it should be.

The ten playable fighters are varied and colorful, and the game sports 1200 moves in total, which makes for a nice mix of button bashing and finesse. The problem with this conversion, and it's a big one, is the lack of optimization for the PC. It does not support 3D acceleration out of the box (a D3D patch should be out by now), and even on a 200 MHz MMX Pentium sporting very solid 2D performance the game is not playable with all details maxed out. The original *Virtua Fighter* has similar performance, but it had a solid low-resolution mode for mid-range machines to use. *Virtua Fighter 2* has no low-resolution options at all, only a choice between 8- or 16-bit color in 640x480 and an option to reduce the displayable screen area. However, the screen and window sizes aren't user definable, but offer merely a choice between small and even smaller.

While it's true this is a great fighting game, it's not as great as it should be. Still, after tweaking things accordingly, the fighting action is rock solid, and with the D3D patch it may even be superior to the Sega Saturn version. *–Jason D'Aprile*

★★★½☆

Virtua Fighter 2

Sega Entertainment • www.sega.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial, hotseat

Forced Alliance

Ripcord's latest definitely feels forced

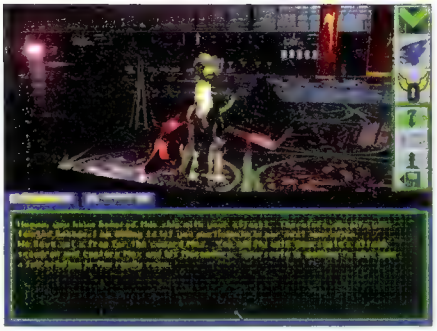
Now is just about the opportune time for a newcomer to break into the space combat field dominated by LucasArts and Origin. *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter*'s mainly multiplayer experience alienated many solo players while *Privateer 2* turned out to be a shadow of the original. Thus, a well-made star fighter game should be able to stand out. Ripcord's *Forced Alliance: The Glarious Mandate*, however, is not that game.

Set in a future where humanity is battling two alien foes, the Voraptoid and the Marauders, you start the game as a cadet pilot in the Stellar Aviation Combat School and must work your way up the ranks. As you progress, you'll find yourself involved in a plot full of intrigue and mystery. The amount of freedom you have in missions is considerable as you can choose how the mission (and the game itself) will unfold. But sometimes this backfires, as suddenly you'll be offered choices that seem to come out of left field (do you destroy that Voraptoid freighter or defect?).

Yet this is the least of *Forced Alliance*'s problems, as the overall effort is crippled by poor graphics, game crashing bugs, and disappointing gameplay. Considering the game has support for 3Dfx cards (albeit very temperamental support), the graphics are astonishingly bad. The engine feels like it might have been state-of-the-art three years ago, and at times seems more VGA than SVGA. Ships and fighters are an eclectic amalgamation of *Wing Commander*, *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* styles, but the game is so dark and murky, it's hard to discern the details on any of them.

Graphics can be forgiven, but gameplay can't. Space combat basically comes down to furballs that are so close-in that dogfighting is relatively pointless. The computer-controlled ships will often pound the daylights out of you before you even get a chance to engage them.

Then there are the bugs and other quirks that ruin the game. On two different machines, the game would suddenly shut down as a mission ended. Or depending on the phase of the moon, you may or may not have to use the 3Dfx fix in the graphics option to get your card to work right. Or there are times when you watch your wingmen fly through solid objects, such as space stations. By then, you quickly get the feeling *Forced Alliance* isn't the only thing forced in this title. *–Jason Ocampo*



If you defect, you'll find yourself taking orders from the Voraptoid

★½☆☆☆

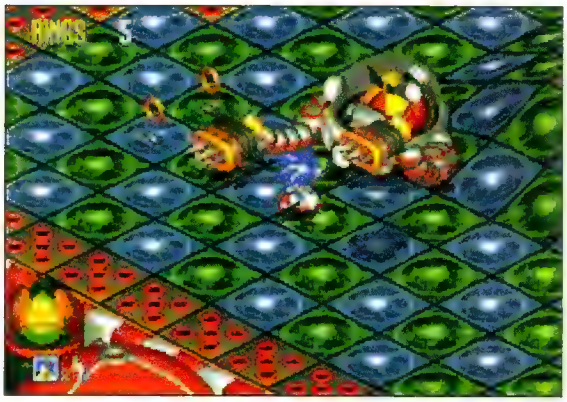
Forced Alliance: The Glarious Mandate
Ripcord Games • www.ripcord.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 486DX-100 or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

IF YOU ARE GOING TO DRAW A LINE IN THE SAND...

Sonic 3D Blast

More of the blue rash for your PC

Sonic is back. Again. This time in an almost true 3D environment with a nicely isometric overhead slant to his usual obnoxiously colorful world. *Sonic 3D Blast* is a conversion of the Saturn and Genesis game and is actually a surprisingly entertaining platform game; it manages to take the charm and simple playability of the 2D series into a new 3D view.



The evil and obese Dr. Robotnik is back to ravage the poor Flickies

Oooo, fake 3D tunnel sequences are all the rage

Once you get used to them, the controls are responsive, and the 21 levels are interesting and entertaining enough to romp through. Sega has also added PC-specific bonus rounds, though these "3D" tunnel sequences aren't exactly awe-inspiring. The game sports an auto-save feature after finishing a level, a feature the console versions lacked.

Graphically, *Sonic 3D Blast* is very attractive, with some excellent looking bits of level design spread across the various landscapes (jungles, iceworlds, forests, techno-city, and any other place where you can use bright and sometimes gaudy colors to good effect). The music is also nicely done and sound effects are, well, pretty much the same ones that *Sonic* games always use.

Since the goal in each level is basically to free the cute little birdies of Flicky Island trapped inside of the still dastardly Dr. Robotnik's bad, er, things, it's perfect fare for the kids. For anyone else looking for a solidly entertaining and off-beat platform game, *Sonic 3D Blast* proves to be a good choice all around. *–Jason D'Aprile*

★★★½☆

Sonic 3D Blast

Sega Entertainment • www.sega.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 75MHz Pentium or higher, 8MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

Mortal Kombat Trilogy

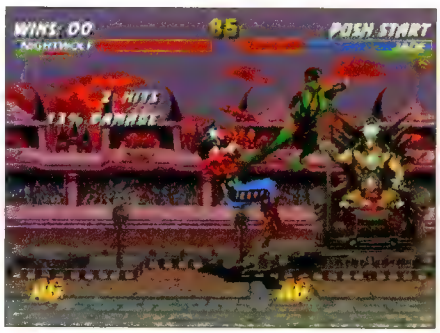
More mortal mayhem to move to your machine

Add another arcade conversion to the growing list… well, in this case, a conversion of a console revamp of an arcade series. *Mortal Kombat Trilogy* is, for fans of the series, a really nifty idea – take all the characters and backdrops from all the previous *Mortal Kombat* games and put them into one huge brawlfest. Of course, it would be better if the *Mortal Kombat* games were particularly good to begin with – Sega's *Fighters Megamix* this ain't.

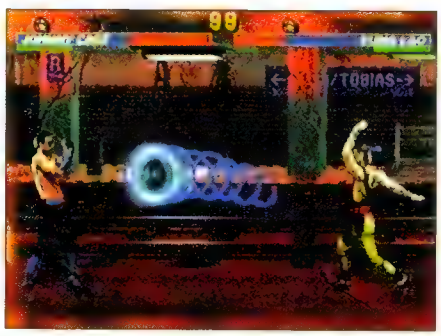
Still, this is the best *Kombat* title to appear on the PC, if only due to its sheer bulk of fighting action and decent control pad support. You can finally use two Microsoft Sidewinder or Gravis gamepads chained together for two-player competition. Also, despite gameplay that doesn't have a leg to stand on compared to *Street Fighter II* or *Virtua Fighter*, there's a decided fun factor here in the cheesy moves, fake blood and lame finishing moves. And some of the characters are actually quite distinctive (especially since the bosses are playable).

The biggest disappointment with *Mortal Kombat Trilogy* is the graphics. While they aren't bad, the game only supports low-resolutions and is rather unrefined and fuzzy looking, thus taking away from the sharp, high quality look that the arcade machines always seemed to have. The sound effects and music, on the other hand, are quite good, giving the game solid "punch" in the audio department.

If you want *Mortal Kombat* on your PC, this is the only one to get. Overall, it's a solid conversion, even supporting network play, and while more work should have gone into the graphics, it's not bad for what it is. *–Jason D'Aprile*



More bloody beat 'em up action for your computer, this is the best Mortal Kombat PC title yet



All the brutal action of the consoles is here in this translation, if more than a tad on the fuzzy side

★★½☆☆

Mortal Kombat Trilogy

GT Interactive • www.gtinteractive.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2 players, LAN, same machine

Pro-Pinball: Timeshock

Machina ex machina

Pro-Pinball: Timeshock goes far beyond normal attempts at computer pinball by actually putting a pinball table in your computer, not just pinball-style gameplay – it's a true machine-in-the-machine. Empire has crafted its own true-to-life pinball table, and what a table it is. They built a super-detailed model on a Silicon Graphics workstation; while you usually can't see it during gameplay, they've even modeled individual rivets and realistic wiring. What this means for gameplay is an incredible visual and mechanical representation of a pinball table on your computer.

Because of the detail, the game can support an amazing range of visual scales, from lowly 640x480 at 256 colors on up to 1600x1200 at some 16 million colors (as if anyone has that kind of hardware). Tested at 800x600 on a 133MHz Pentium (at 65,000 colors) and on a 266MHz Pentium II (at 16 million colors), the gameplay remains fluid and the visuals extremely impressive. This is one of those pinball games where it is nearly impossible to stop applying "body English" – no dull gameplay here. Even the manual is a wonder, especially with its nine pages outlining, in step-by-step instructions, all the various actions you must complete to get the extra-special bonuses.

Depending on your take on pinball, though, there are potential problems with the game. While it does it so well, the modeling of only a single table may not be enough for some gamers. Like all computer pinball games, it suffers from occasional problems of perception; for example, the direct overhead view gives the clearest view of the ball but makes it very difficult to discern depth, while angled views help give depth cues but sometimes hide the ball (especially when it's toward the back of the table). It would have been nice if the operator's menus had been accessible via regular computer menus as well as the table's dot matrix display. Lastly, the launcher is a new fangled, automatic one – hit the enter key and the ball is launched, with no control over speed like you get with the old-fashioned, spring-loaded variety.

Criticisms aside, this is the best hardcore pinball game to come to gamers in a long time, if not ever. If you want lots of variety, this may not be the game for you, but "pinball wizards" shouldn't miss it. *–Scott Udell*

[***Note:*** *The version reviewed is a boxed version that has shipped in Europe; Empire tells us it is identical to the one shipping in North America.*]

"Frenzy" is an understatement when you get multiple balls in play at once

★★★★☆

Pro-Pinball: Timeshock

Empire Interactive • www.empire-us.com • Requirements: DOS, Windows 95, 60 MHz Pentium, 8MB RAM (16 for Windows 95 version), 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, hotseat

IN

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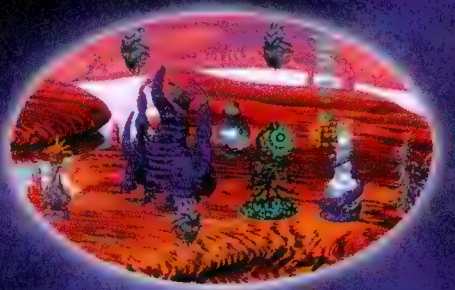

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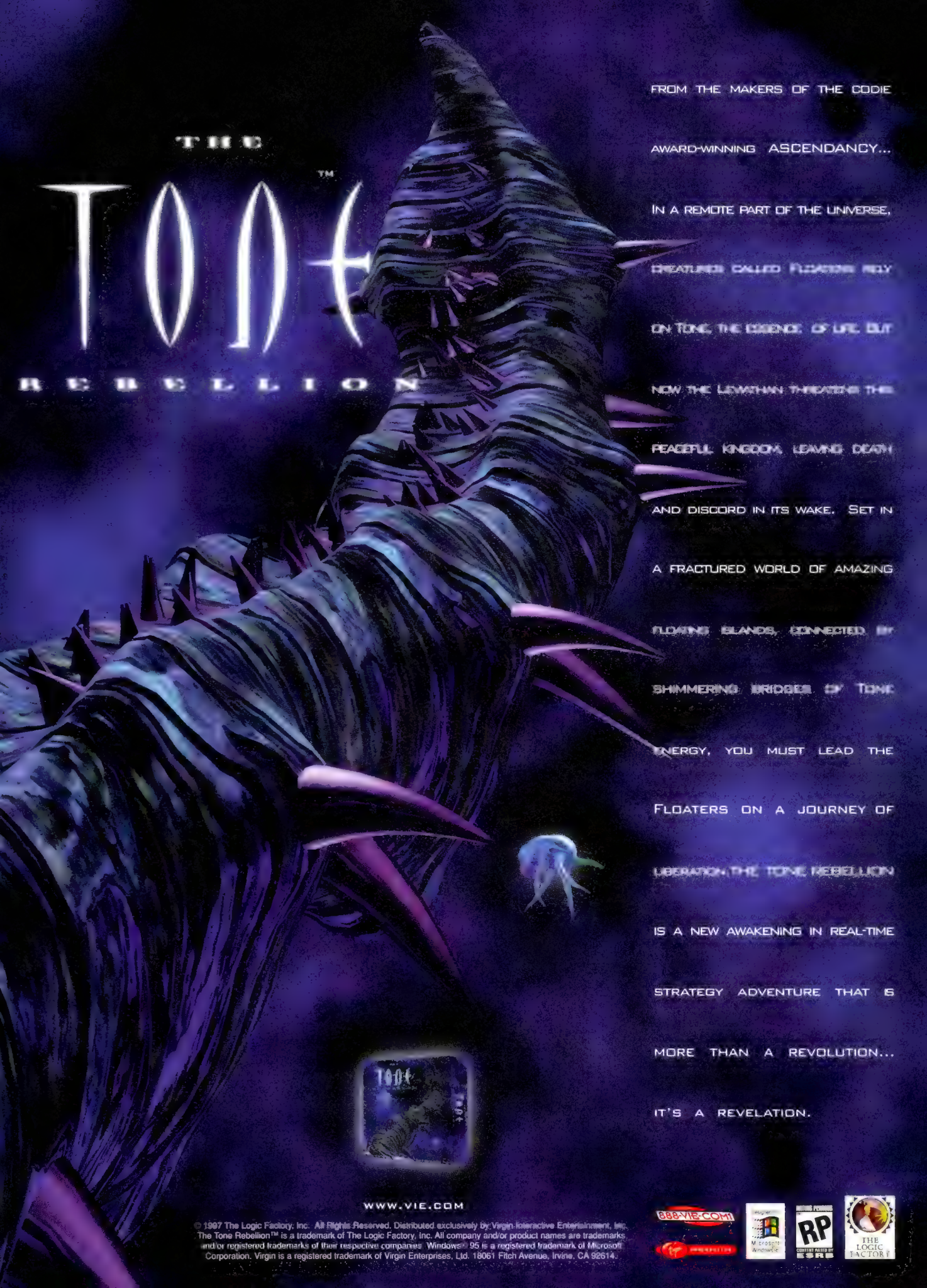

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Road to Nowhere

Traditional gaming and the faceless table

Is there a splash of Luddite in all of us? Come on. Admit it. No matter how many high tech toys we own, no matter how sexy our home systems, no matter how geeky, wireheaded, notebook-toting, palmtop-pocketing, home-accounting-software-check-writing, Turbotaxing, downright techno-slick we make it a point to be, aren't there some things – even one thing – we wish had been left the heck alone? For me it's toys and games that were *not* designed for the computer, which have been evolving to software state for some time now. After heavy campaigning, software state is up for being named as one of the states of matter, despite the spirited protests of solid, liquid and gas.

At the time of this writing, Hasbro Interactive has released *Pictionary* and *Boggle* for the PC. Certainly not "the final straw" that might cause shouts of, "No, not that! Is *nothing* sacred?," it still gives one pause. *AD&D* table gamers have been very receptive to computer adaptation of their worlds, as have "traditional" table gamers. Both groups are missing the face to face contact and a number of other elements from their games in the original form, but it seems that traditional game players and toy lovers are missing more. Role-playing is about stats, and story and glory... and much of that is available on the PC; but so much about the other broad segment of games is about tactile stimulation, about equipment, about... well, stuff. Let's take a look at what you can't get from PC versions of some of our classic favorites.

Pictionary

Breaking pencil points, miscounting spaces to cheat your way ahead, hundreds of paper scraps on the floor, a plastic timer to beat the last few grains of salt through, trashing the whole board if you're an immature sore loser.

Scrabble

Wooden racks with falling tiles, vowels lost forever under the forced air heating elements, trashing the whole board if you're an immature sore loser.

Monopoly

Blue fifty dollar bills, pocketing five hundreds or short-changing your opponents as you pretend to be an honest banker, pushing around the little metal shoe or top hat, running out of plastic hotels, trashing the whole board if you're an immature sore loser.

[top to bottom]

Smoking guns were never an issue

The Monopoly icon – inanimate until now

Pictionary – the computer draws just a bit better than most of us

It's really no Risk without the little plastic (or wooden) pieces

Clue

Finding the little candlestick under the refrigerator one day, watching your opponents mark their logic charts, peeking at the cards before putting them into the secret envelope, the secret envelope itself, trashing...

Battleship

Moving your ships when the opponent gets close, the great blue plastic compartments, having the base-pegs of the ships fall off so that it won't plug into the board, chewing on the red and white pegs.

Boggle

Waking everyone in the neighborhood while you shake for the next game.

Play-Doh

(Who thought this was a good idea for the computer?) Smelling it, eating it, feeding it to the dog, putting it in your sister's hair, putting it in your own hair, finding bright pink crumbly clumps of it in the carpet, mixing all the colors until you have one big brown lump... getting depressed about that and really wishing you hadn't.

Lego

Hearing the gratifying "snap" of the pieces. *Lego*, however, is excepted from the "why?" group of toys due to its excellence as a CAD tool for mega-design by aspiring *Lego* architects.

Mr. Potato Head

Losing all of his ears, using real potatoes or other vegetables to make Mr. Rutabaga Head, Mr. Turnip Head or Mr. Spaghetti Squash Head.

Barbie

Cutting off all her hair, pulling off her arms, bending her flexible knees backwards, painting on anatomically correct features with a magic marker.

Although the computer versions of all of these have amazing enhancements and variations, there *are* the above fabulous tidbits of experience that we are missing. In retrospect, perhaps it's not a terrible idea to have allowed these games into software state, as long as we sometimes get to play them across a real table, where we can see each other, and laugh and tease and punch and cheat and trash the board. Or hey, we can simply stare at the screen and become Mr. Ergonomically-enhanced-office-chair potatoes... with our ears intact. –*Cindy Yans*

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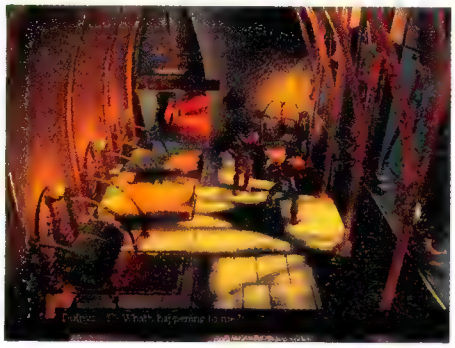
Boots of Re

Unca digs deep into Dark Earth

Toaster flew back in October and talked Bashed, Battered, Bewildered, and me into celebrating Hallowfest, the climax of the liturgical year in the Wicca community. It is also known as All Hallows' Eve or Halloween in the real world. He's been talking of becoming a white witch ever since he read Rosemary Edghill's Bast novels. Bast is a modern-day witch who doubles as a part-time sleuth. I told him, "Who ever heard of a dragon becoming a witch!"

He said, "Maybe it's never been done before, but not every dragon looks like Humphrey Bogart, or is a hard-boiled private-eye, either." He does look a lot like Bogart but he's more of a soft-boiled crossing guard. Still, he does have a point. Since Wicca isn't an organized religion, there's no reason why even a dragon can't be a white witch.



[clockwise from top]

Pray to the Rahal to save the game

The stairs lead to the hub of the city, the back wall includes passageways to the balcony

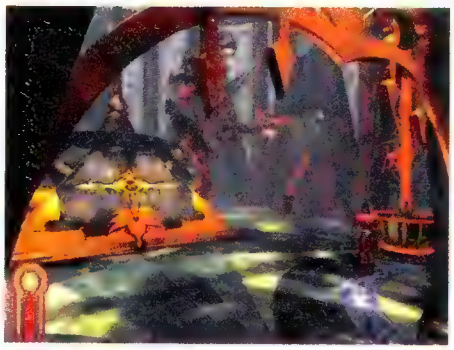
You stand to the left in front of the entrance to the Guardian barracks. Your father and Lory are standing on the land bridge leading to the hall you must guard

Your fellow Guardian is waiting for you to help him guard the hall

After you wake in the hospital you must kill the guard

Hot & Not

October was a great month for role-playing gamers, but slow for adventurers until the last week. Both *Fallout* and *Lands of Lore II* competed for best role-playing game, while *Ultima Online* finished beta testing and supplanted *Diablo* as the most popular multiplayer role-playing game. *Broken Sword: The Smoking Mirror* was the most popular new adventure game until *Zork Grand Inquisitor* and *Riven* were released.



Dark Earth

This intriguing new action/adventure game is a little tricky getting started. For one thing, it can only be saved in certain locations. The player's alter ego, Arkhan, has to pray to a plaque bearing the symbol of the Rahal; only then can the game be saved. Fortunately, there are several plaques in the game, including the one located in Arkhan's quarters where the player begins. It's on the back wall of the alcove with a sink.

After picking up the smoked meat, his sword and uniform, Arkhan should exit the room, turn right and go down the stairs. Past the fountain and two of his fellow Guardians of Fire he can listen in on a conversation between his father and Lory and then follow them over the bridge. Waiting for him in front of the Council Chambers is another Guardian. The next scene happens automatically, the player only controls Arkhan briefly for two of the several battles before Arkhan is contaminated and blacks out.

When Arkhan wakes as a partial Shankcreature he'll be forced to kill the guard that walks in. Be prepared. There is a Rahal plaque on the wall in the room. In the next room there is a potion to diminish Arkhan's contamination and a healing vial. Save the potion until Arkhan really needs it. Don't go outside until Thanandar responds to Phedoria's query from outside, "Is everything all right?"

Outside and next door near the cacti is Rylsadhar's house. Talk to him and Kalhi. After you're finished go to the main temple and up the stairs through the door to the left and talk to Sesekan, and take the CD (the mirror from before) near the door. Go back to the Guardian of Fire barracks, past the guards and fountains and up the stairs.

Around the railing is a doorway to the balcony. To the left is the prison and to the right is Bogdarans laboratory. Visit Bogdaran first. Go up the stairs and take the key and use it to open the trunk downstairs. Take the uniform, go to the prison, kill the guard, take his keys, and open the gate. Give the uniform to Kalhi. Follow her closely and she will take you past the barracks guards. When she talks to the guard guarding the lower city platform, hide behind the cart. Ride the platform down to the lower city. To activate it, face the red control handles. After you find the tavern where Delia works in the lower city, go to the bridge and jump in the water to fight Soros and Thandar in their hideout.

Generally, every item you find in the game is useful, somewhere. A flask of Stohll (the Spartan equivalent of a pint of moonshine) will put the Konkalite guard to sleep. The smoked meat will bribe your way past the guard in front of the Builder's Palace.

You may have to use the Special Attack Move in order to win some of the tougher battles in the game. Be careful of using it too often. It increases the rate of Arkhan's contamination. *–Andy Backer*

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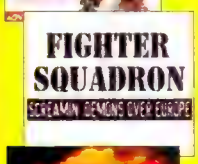

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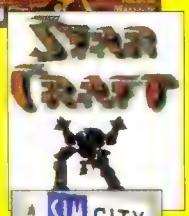

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'PANZER GENERAL II' contains enhanced multimedia footage and scenario briefings. Also, all new campaigns, play some from the Allied side. New interactive terrain reflects battle damage. Multiplayer support.
SSI (War)
Release Date: NOW PC CD $42

'DIE HANSE' Sail across the length of Medieval Europe as a merchant of the Hanseatic League, vying to be the first to fill your house with valuable goods. As you battle the North Sea, you encounter pirates and blockades as you make your way home. English translation included
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THQ (Strategy)
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'POPULOUS:THE THIRD COMING' Large strategies can be planned and enacted from fully playable global view. Various terrain varieties(mountains, oceans, aerial views) impose different challenges on your warriors as you lead them into battle.
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Fallout

Son of Wasteland stands tall

[clockwise from right]

This Brotherhood paladin is one tough hombre

Your Overseer congratulates you on saving the world

The end for the Master

They finally did it. Years ago, they fought a nuclear war, and trashed most of the world. In the western United States, or what's left of it, the last remnants of humanity struggle on among the blasted ruins of once-great cities, or deep under the earth in massive Vaults, refuges built before the war in anticipation of the Armageddon to come. That's where you come in. As inhabitants of Vault 13, you and yours are faced with extermination as your water supply is failing. The Overseer, the chief of the Vault, taps you to go into the hostile outside world and search for a water-chip, an electronic part needed to restore the Vault's ability to produce fresh water. Buckling on your trusty pistol, you shoulder your pack and head out into a world you've only known through stories and myth. You're going out *there*, and who knows if you'll be coming back?

So begins Interplay's latest RPG, *Fallout*. Building on the post-apocalyptic world made famous in the old 8-bit classic *Wasteland*, *Fallout* blends satire, cynicism, and humor with a healthy dose of grim, gritty conflict into one of the most enjoyable, if rather short, RPGs in recent memory. From the opening video, done in a faux-retro style featuring futuristic television broadcasts extrapolated from 1950s culture, to the ever-present Fallout Boy cartoon character who adorns various parts of the manual and interface screens, the atmosphere in the game treads the line between the serious and the sardonic. Reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, much of the game has a steam-tech Neo-Victorian look to it, coupled with some very modern, high-tech weaponry. The intent, it seems, is to convey the sense of a medium to high-tech world suddenly reduced to low-tech savagery, but with vestiges of the old world hanging on. By and large, Interplay succeeds dramatically in setting this mood, and fans of *Mad Max* and other end-of-civilization romps should feel right at home.

The setting is Southern California, which is portrayed as nothing but a blasted wasteland of ruined cities, mutated monsters, and desolate emptiness. Having a real place as its setting adds verisimilitude to the game, but hinders replayability, as placement of minor locations like, say, Los Angeles, cannot easily be moved about without arousing derision. Most experienced RPG fans will have little trouble grasping the basics of *Fallout*. Characters sport the usual bundle of statistics and skills, adapted for the mixed-tech environment of the game. While this is definitely a single character RPG, there are a bazillion ways to customize one's game-world surrogate. What is more, the game actually allows characters with very different abilities to do equally well (or nearly so). Building a walking death machine is not the only solution; the entire game can be played pretty successfully with an emphasis on stealth and technology, or on silver-tongued diplomacy. Combat is a key part of the game, however, and fans of turn-based RPG battles will be in near-Nirvana. Weapons range from the mundane (brass knuckles) to the outrageous (flamethrowers), and many feature different types of ammunition for different occasions. Only the absence of true, player-controlled compadres takes the shine off the battles in *Fallout*, that and the occasional brain-dead behavior of NPCs who are ostensibly helping out. It is even possible to kill the bad guys with, of all things, a BB gun.

All in all, it's a very good system. It's very non-linear, in that outside of three major quests, there is nothing really pushing the player towards specific locations or actions. This non-linearity comes at a price, though. As it is impossible for the designers to predict what players will do and where they will go once they've left Vault 13, all sorts of anomalies are possible. It is easily possible for players to kill NPCs or accomplish tasks out of sequence, thus making future conversations with important NPCs rather problematic, or at least frustrating. In Junktown, for example, after helping the "mayor" kill a wicked casino operator, on subsequent visits

with that same mayor he betrays no knowledge of what has transpired. Likewise, the quest to "find the water thief" in Vault 13 magically appears, already marked as accomplished, with no direct input from the player; and the final voice-over after winning the game lists events that the player never experienced. It turns out that the game is extrapolating; actions by the player have prevented certain things from coming to pass. Not a flaw, really, just disconcerting to the uninitiated. Each location exists independently of the others, so it is entirely possible to stumble upon a place meant for a later period in the game and "solve" a still unimagined quest (usually by killing the bad guys). This isn't necessarily bad, as it removes those frustrating and unsatisfying "triggers" that bedevil so many RPGs, but it does mean that players have to develop a strong tolerance for, um, temporal anomalies.

The biggest complaint about *Fallout*, really, is its brevity. This problem is intimately related to the game's non-linear structure. There are three main, make-or-break quests in *Fallout*. The first is the waterchip search; failing this means death for the Vault and the end of the game. After that, the player has 500 days (or 400, based on how the first quest went) to kill the Master, leader of the plan to rule the world with mutant superhumans. Failure to do so in the time allotted leads to, you guessed it, destruction of the vault and the end of the game. The other major quest is to destroy the base where the Mutants spawn; destruction of this base, along with the death of the Master, ends the game favorably. Theoretically, one could simply kill the Master, and then play on indefinitely, until the time was ripe for ending the game. In practice, this isn't too likely. Putting aside the reluctance of gamers to pass up a sure win, by the time a player is strong enough to take on the mutant base or the Master (and it doesn't take more than a few evenings' play to get to that level), most of the other challenges in the game are anticlimactic. Wandering around the wastelands in power armor, armed to the teeth with energy weapons, makes fighting cave rats something of a letdown.

That's not really a fatal flaw, though – far from it. It is perfectly possible to ramble around the wasteland, accomplishing good (or bad) deeds at a more leisurely pace. There's just nothing to prevent a lucky, perceptive, or aggressive gamer from ripping through the game in 20-30 hours of gaming. With judicious use of saves, it's quite possible to rocket up levels, gain powerful weapons, and win the game without even touching on most of the mini-quests. Of course, even a short game delivers 25-40 *quality* gaming hours, with the possibility for replay being high; despite its initial brevity, *Fallout* certainly does well in the "bang for the buck" category. Other quibbles – lack of effective NPC assistance in combat, some muddled and obtuse quests, the general sameness of interior locations – are not nearly enough to take the bloom off this radioactive rose. Some users have reported a handful of other problems, but none of those showed up in the gaming done for this review. Overall, in fact, *Fallout* performs very well in the technical department, with the minor exception of some interface slowdown with anything less than a full install.

[clockwise from left]

Stalking a Super Mutant in the Military Base. Gatling laser to the ready!

Outside the Brotherhood of Steel...these guys don't dance

Fallout comics? Well, not really, but this is a good indication of the style of the game

Fallout might not be the game for everyone. Its theme is dark, though with a certain black humor twist. The emphasis is definitely on combat, and the game provides a good turn-based combat system, oodles of weapons (each with distinct ammo types, making for such rich decisions as armor piercing vs. high explosive rounds), and lots of gory ways to die. Puzzles are really nonexistent, in the sense of those in the *Wizardry* games or other "classic" RPGs for example. Instead, in keeping with the game's fiction, most "puzzles" are really technical mysteries that are fairly logical and intuitive. There's only one character to control directly, and interaction with the world is less than in some action games. For anyone with an interest in complex, combat-heavy, lovingly produced RPGs, though, *Fallout* is a must buy. In an age where many are predicting the death of traditional RPGs at the hands of multiplayer extravaganzas, *Fallout* is a glowing example of the genre, one which positively radiates quality. *Fallout* – it's da bomb.–*Robert Mayer*

★★★★½

Fallout

Interplay • www.interplay.com • Requirements: DOS, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM; Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM; MacOS, System 7.12 or higher, PowerMacintosh, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

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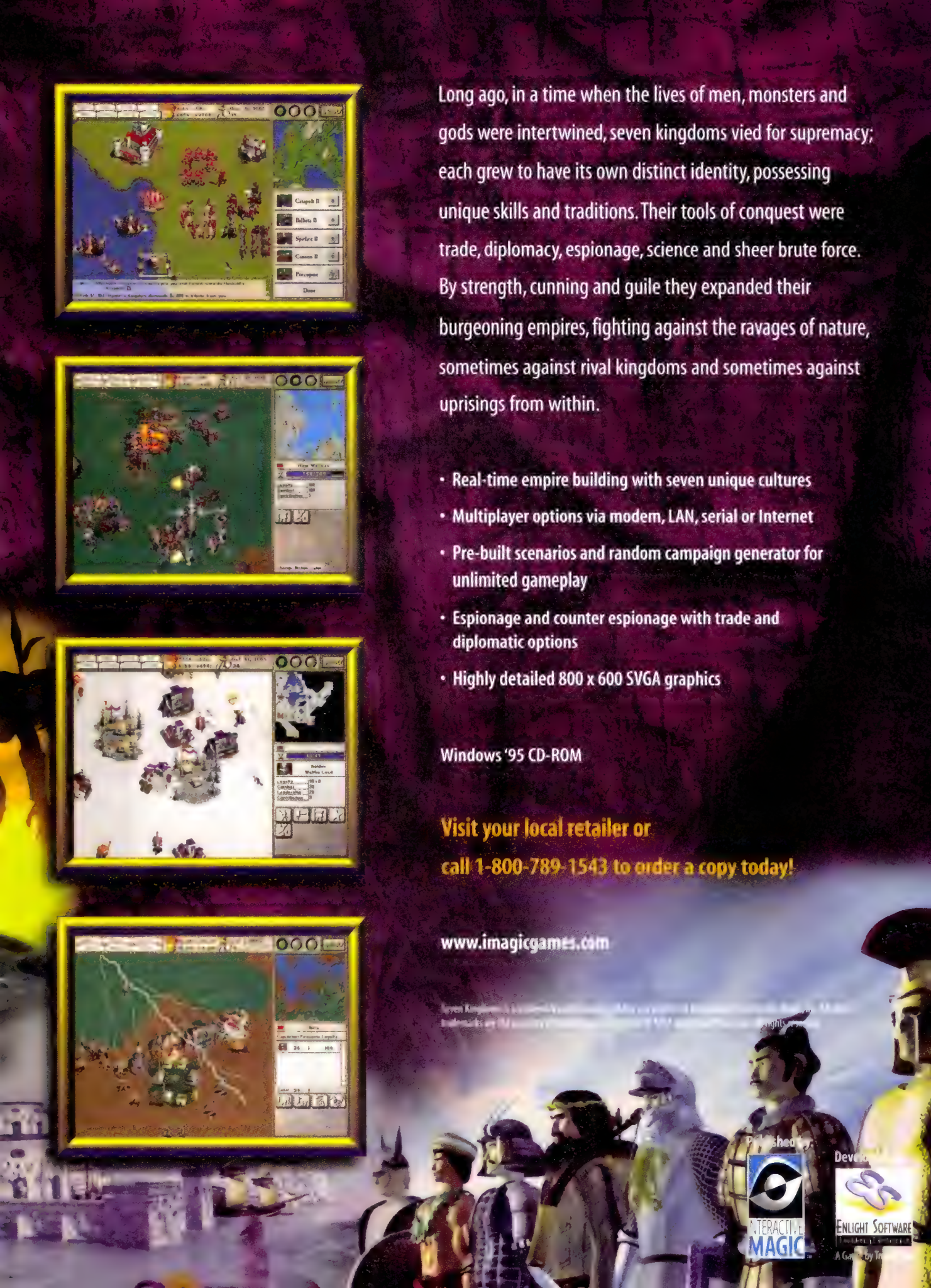


Lands of Lore: Guardians of Destiny

Polymorphic perversion with feet of clay

Westwood Studios, after what seemed like four hundred years of development, finally gave us what we have long been awaiting, *Land of Lore: Guardians of Destiny*. But was it worth the wait? Yes and no.

It is the plane of mortals – the "real world," so to speak. Your name is Luther, and you are the son of Scotia, a powerful sorceress who was killed and ascended (or descended) to another plane just after she unearthed some Ancient Magic. You find yourself in the town of Gladstone, in the dungeon, serving a sentence for crimes your mother committed. Wild physical changes are occurring with no warning. At least puberty came with the *Now You Are 12* book for boys. And if becoming a man weren't weird enough, now you are morphing uncontrollably, from your dapper Samson-tressed self into a small lizard, into a gigantic, hideous, monstrous, frightful, repulsive creature in dire need of plastic surgery (or a shave, at the very least), and back into your dapper self again. It's becoming a trifle annoying.

Anyway, it turns out that the morphing curse is related to the Ancient Magic released by Scotia, who, at the same time, awoke a hibernating Mother Beast. This rather disgusting creature began popping out spider filled egg sacs like no tomorrow and her main purpose is to acquire the Ancient Magic in order to resurrect the evil god Belial. This would be a bad thing.

The story evolves beautifully, from the moment Luther escapes from the dungeon, all the way to, well, just *before* the not-so-satisfying ending. It grabs you immediately and keeps you interested throughout. The Lands themselves are always compelling. The sense of excitement at finding a new location spreads infectiously, and there's a lot to discover here. While the land is not *Daggerfall*-sized, it is filled with a richness that a *Daggerfall*-scope product could never provide. Navigation is very simple with the very handy customizable automap feature, which is charmingly drawn in what appears to be the hand of a child.

Always central to the story and the action is the random polymorphism. The lights flash, the sound effect blares, and you know that Luther is about to change. Into what? is always the key question. Certain situations require the diminutive lizard, while others require the brute strength of Yeti-man. This particular element of surprise is welcome in the early part of the game, but gets old quickly and you'll wish you had more control over the morphing. That does happen, but *way* too late.

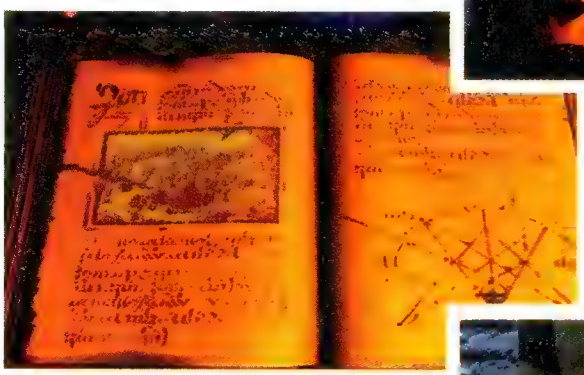
What was *not* worth waiting for? First of all, the graphics engine, which might have been state of the art three or so years ago, looks just that – three years old and counting. The controls are cumbersome, as is the interface and extreme pixellation is often the mode of the moment.

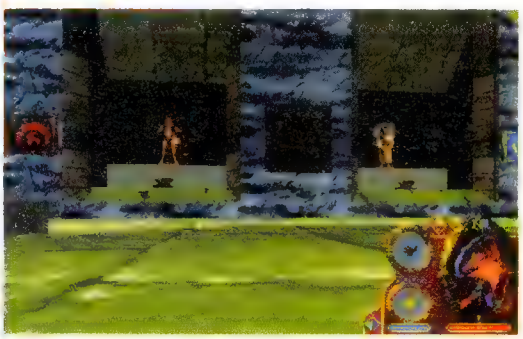
Next, at some point in the development cycle, sequences using full-motion video with actors on rendered backgrounds were introduced. Why, oh why? The rendered cut scenes are often quite beautiful, and the rendered characters work very well. The muddy, fuzzy, badly acted segments are *extremely* out of place here, as is the wise-cracking humor of our hero, Luther. The story itself sets a tone in which that 90s sit-com one-liner humor becomes very distracting (despite the voice actor's obvious talent).

Also, staunch role-playing gamers may be disappointed at many of the weak role-playing elements in the game. Minor graphical representation of stats, single party exploration throughout, and not-particularly-strategic combat make this a much more adventure-style RPG than many (not a severe problem, just a small caveat).

Finally, Luther cannot swim, and drowns or falls to his death often. It's all well and good to have to carefully navigate precipices, but honestly, not even the *reptile* can swim? C'mon. OK, so *all* reptiles cannot swim. Twinsen couldn't swim either, but he wore a dress. Luther, on the other hand…should (swim, that is, not wear a dress).

This is a solid title with an excellent storyline, interesting characters and a rich, convincing world to explore, but the FMV fiasco, awkward controls and the now-quite-dated graphics engine, along with a very anticlimactic ending, make for a not-quite-stellar adventure RPG. You may want to pick it up anyway for the interesting polymorphic possibilities. Be a reptile, be a reptile, all the world…loves a reptile. *–Cindy Yans*





[top to bottom]

Luther compliments the Draracle on his horn

This sepia-toned book appears during episode transitions

Dawn states, "Give me your blade, Luther" (!)

The Draracle orates

★★★½☆

Lands of Lore: Guardians of Destiny

Westwood Studios • www.westwood.com • Requirements: DOS, Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM; Windows 95: 75MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

Broken Sword: The Smoking Mirror

A good circle is hard to follow

Broken Sword is the follow-up to last year's critical hit *Circle of Blood*. *Circle* won universal praise for its beautiful cell animation, outstanding soundtrack, and its involving non-linear plot. *Broken Sword* manages to deliver strongly on these first points, but fails on the third. Everything is in place for another outstanding adventure game, but the straight-as-an-arrow storyline keeps *Sword* from reaching the heights of its predecessor.

George and Nico are back getting into more trouble. While investigating a drug-smuggling ring, Nico comes across a Central American artifact for which she is kidnapped. George, after doing some barrel-bowling for bullies, manages to rescue her. From there they are off across the globe in good *Raiders of the Lost Ark* fashion. Drug-smuggling seems like small potatoes compared to the Cthulhu-like implications that develop in the story. There's a Mayan God, "...who devours the sun and consumes the flesh of all mankind," that is about to be unleashed on our peaceful, post-cold-war world.

[top to bottom]

Tied up in a burning room with a poisonous spider, what's a hero to do?

Pearl and Duane return for a few laughs

All this trouble for one little artifact

There is nothing to complain about with the game's graphics. The animation is as strong as the series' first installment. The professional quality that rivals current full-length animated films is still present. The romantic streets of Paris, timeless London, as well as the lush Caribbean are all brought to life convincingly. There are plentiful little touches such as detailed pedestrians who are seen walking down the sidewalk through a shop's window where your characters are exploring. Parallax scrolling is still used abundantly in many outdoor scenes, giving them a sweeping panoramic quality. FMV cut-scenes are sprinkled through the game to enhance the story.

The box art boasts of three hours of original music plus hundreds of music cues and it's not kidding. There are very few repeating themes through the game. Each scene seems to have its own, unique background music. In one Caribbean setting there's a small street band providing the background music. If the players linger they'll be treated to a surprisingly varied concert of Latin music. The music cues range from low-key to downright loud and jarring.

The voice-acting is also delivered professionally. The banter between George and Nico is natural and believable. Pearl and her slightly loony husband, Duane, make a return for welcome comic relief. Only General Grasiento, who's a combination of petty official and tourist guide, comes across with a bit of overacting. Humor is laced effectively through the conversation. It is at times subtle and at others borders on slapstick. There are numerous sight gags to go along with the finely delivered punch lines.

It's truly unfortunate that so much effort to produce another outstanding game is hampered by the most common complaint of adventure fans, a far too-linear plot. The player is seldom given the choice of pursuing two or more different courses of action. Too many sequences are solved only to have the player forced into proceeding into a single course of action. Only rarely will the gamer have the choice of even visiting two different locations. The locations themselves are also small and confining. There are few large areas to explore. Most areas only seem to shift to three or four sub-scenes.

The puzzles, though, are reasonably varied. Many will involve locating several objects to be used together to effect an escape from the frequent jams into which George and Nico are caught up. These items, though, are never far apart and generally easily located. Players should check each object gained closely; often only after the item has been placed in the player's inventory and re-examined does a clue to its usefulness become apparent. Verbal clues are often harder to obtain. When conversing make sure to repeatedly ask about a pertinent person or item until their icon disappears from the conversation menu. Often an important response is only obtained after wading through several layers of questions.

Like far too many other sequels, the game doesn't live up to the expectations its predecessor set forth. Though it is well produced and solid, most adventure veterans will probably find themselves wishing for a little more *Circle* rather than such a straightforward *Sword*.

–Chuck Klimushyn

★★★☆☆

Broken Sword: The Smoking Mirror

Virgin Interactive • www.vie.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 60MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Mutliplayer: None

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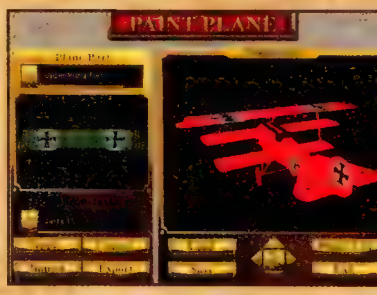

Red Baron® II

LOOK FOR IT NOW!

Resident Evil

The funniest game of the year

Widely considered the best PlayStation game in existence, *Resident Evil* has finally made its way to the PC in a perfect port, with all of the gore of the PlayStation "Director's Cut" (Hollywood marketing comes to gaming – should we be excited by this?) and requiring the use of a 3D accelerator card.

This is a standard-issue haunted house story full of zombies and dripping with not-quite-red blood (it's sorta brown). You control one of two characters and the game changes some of the puzzles accordingly, providing some replay value (and it's a fairly long adventure to begin with). The gameplay consists of not-very-arcade-like action and simple puzzles that would seem innovative if you've never played the original *Alone in the Dark*.

The big mystery in the game is why it requires a 3D accelerator. While the 3D characters have a high-polygon count (and look quite good), the backgrounds are low-resolution (and look quite bad) and there's no real-time 3D à la *Quake*. It seems like more of a marketing necessity than a gameplay one, but whatever.

With a non-issue story and derivative gameplay, there has to be a reason the game's so compelling. It's not scary – the most terrifying thing in the game may be Virgin's eyeball logo animation. It's not the interface, which forces you to use gamepad at all times. It's not the save games, which are limited in number and are only allowed in certain locations.

No, what makes the game worth playing is being able to experience what is the worst dialog and voice-acting ever committed to CD-ROM. Eclipsing even the legendary *Inca* series, you can only hope it was intentionally made this way (some of the location descriptions would imply it's just one of those bizarre Japanese translation issues). Whatever the case, *Resident Evil* is the funniest game of 1997, and fans of all things Velveeta should worship it like the god it is. *–Steve Bauman*

▲ **Actual dialog: "Find anything interesting? No." Never mind the enormous dying snake you're walking over...**

◀ **Like, ohmigod, totally**

★★★☆☆

Resident Evil

Virgin • www.vie.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM, 3D accelerator • Multiplayer: None

Byzantine: The Betrayal

An average, run-of-the-mosque adventure

Thanks to a hand held device found in the game, time travel becomes a possibility

Tucked inside some very elaborate packaging, *Byzantine: The Betrayal* should feel more distinct than it actually is. Despite the impressive visuals, gamers will walk away feeling educated, but only mildly entertained.

An old friend's urgent letter plunges gamers deep into a plot filled with conspiracy, murder, and political turmoil. Further investigation uncovers a scheme to plunder history's greatest treasures.

Fantastic on-location filming captures the grand architecture of modern day Turkey, and shows where the designers' talents truly lie. At each of the many locations in the game, players can pan the view to absorb the majesty of their surroundings. A handy overview map makes traveling between areas a quick and easy process.

Acting in the game varies from average to amateurish. In contrast to the gorgeous backdrops, most of the acting squad appears camera shy to the point of being unintentionally laughable (several even kept looking at some off-screen director for the "Say Cheese" cue). Regardless of the actors' iffy talent, the story itself remains compelling enough to make up for their lack of professionalism.

The game probably won't challenge veteran adventurers with its assorted mix of easy puzzles. Many of the solutions are either found in obvious hotspots or spelled out in one of the many conversations. While most of the game plays at a leisurely pace, some sequences require quick reflexes. Search an apartment too long, or pry into the wrong part of an underground labyrinth, and the only "plot" you'll uncover is the one they bury you in.

Following the unwritten rules of adventure games to the letter, *Byzantine: The Betrayal* finds itself in an uncomfortable role as the nice boy your parents *want* you to date. It's a fine, upstanding, hard working product that takes no chances. Take the plunge and buy it if you just can't seem to play enough adventure games. *–Anne Royal*

★★½☆☆

Byzantine: The Betrayal

Discovery • www.discovery.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90 MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM Multiplayer: None

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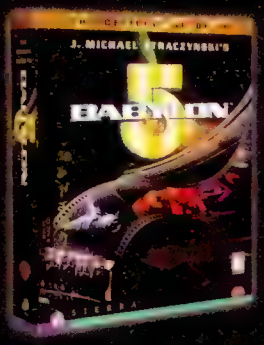

www.sierra.com/babylon5

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SONIC IMAGES

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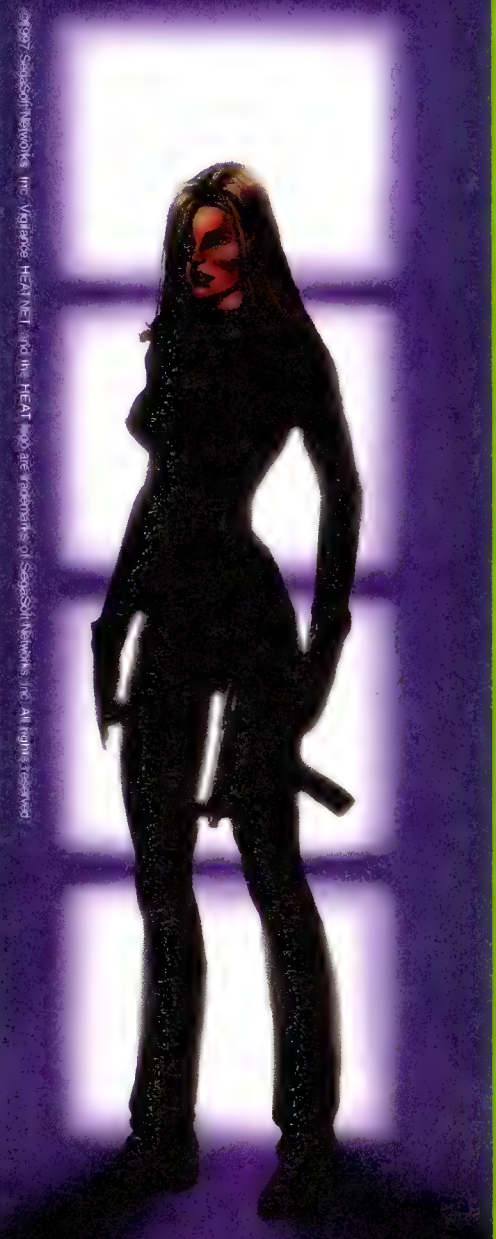

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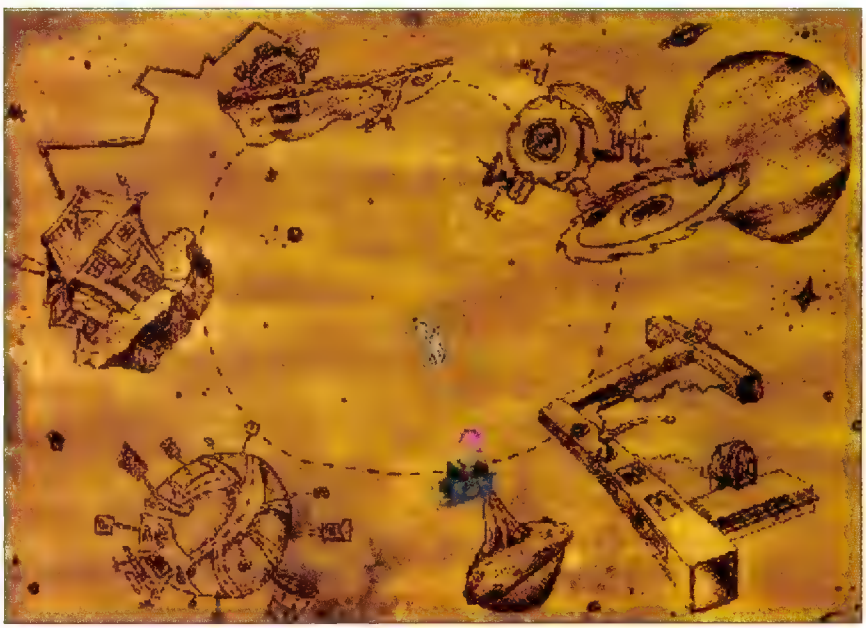
In Sirtech's *Armed and Delirious*, grandmothers don't embroider doilies. They boil them. Grandmas don't bake cookies. They cook bakers. Forget tender love and affection, as these abrasive elderly matrons prefer strong drink to quality time with their grandchildren. Twisted? Oh yeah. Delightfully so.

As cohesively as one can relate the premise of this bizarre tale, the rabbit of the universe strips poor grandma of her cookbook. Oh, and he's hurtled her loved ones (a jet set right out of *Leave It To Cleaver*... meat cleaver, that is...) into another dimension. Since the entire galaxy relies on this cookbook for its cosmic existence, retrieving it for grandma is your official purpose in this game. Unofficially, your purpose is to complete the adventure without spouting, "Ssshh... be vewwwy qwwwiet... we are hunting bunny wabbits" at every social function your kids beg you not to attend.

The term "surreal" barely scratches the surface in describing the total *Armed and Delirious* experience. Introduction, credits, menus, and game backdrops all look carefully misplaced and oddly positioned in a brilliant stroke of reverse psychology. Unexpected events await you in every encounter with the game's wacky characters, and especially in grandma's own mannerisms and reactions to the circumstances around her. Like any victim of digital senility, she at times appears lucid enough to murmur vaguely sane observations. Other times, she spews a steady stream of tangential blathering best interpreted by toddlers and psychopathic game reviewers.

For those folks decrying that the commercialization of gaming has destroyed ingenuity and creativity, this oasis is definitely not a mirage. Short of a text parser, the game embodies all of the same innovative wit and charm found in vintage adventure games of old. A gargantuan elephant's foot periodically stomping from the rafters



Grandma dashes across the galaxy in her brand new space ship

When grandma shows those shapely legs, even Nasal Man cannot resist the temptation

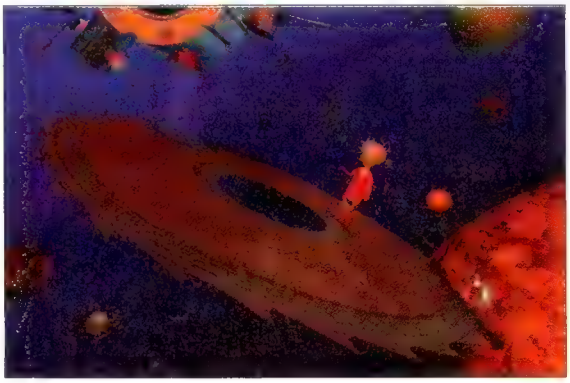
near an empty bed holds the key to helping grandma survive dizzy spells. A converted washing machine allows her better galactic mobility than those silly grocery store electric carts (as if the elderly *need* "vehicular homicide of the entire produce section" on their criminal record). Whatever situations arise in the game, sound reason and "normal" logic won't get you much farther than the main menu; for better success, opt for odd when encountering almost any puzzle that presents itself.

All too often, games touting themselves as "different" offer more gimmick than gameplay. Diverting so much attention to twisting reality into reverse reality, these games often wind up being too predictable in their unpredictability. In this game, the logical blends cleverly with the illogical such that neither seems truly fitting nor grossly out of place. It'll take incredible effort to avoid spending the entire session with *Armed and Delirious* caught off-guard or momentarily stunned.

Thanks to some zany designers, the game feels so at ease with its demented state that it imposes the same acceptance onto players. Part way through the game, one leaves the comfortable state of sanity. Suddenly, using that blow dryer on the rabid farmer's wet hair seems out of the question when compared to swallowing the light bulb to which you attached the blow dryer, while making romantic advances towards the neighbor's bathroom plunger.

A couple small nits that need picking involve the somewhat disorienting interface (no, we can't chalk up grandma's awkward movements to her thong Depends). Also, on occasion the puzzles are so unique they border on the unintuitive, and require cycling through one's inventory to try every object. Sure, handing grandma's porno magazine to the armed guard to distract him seems sensible enough. On the other hand, will anyone really decipher from pure educated guesswork that the airy chicken needs to be affixed to the fireplace mantle? Not on the first try. Probably not even on the second try.

For the ravenous lunatic in all of us, *Armed and Delirious* presents the most delicious experience in adventure gaming since Guybrush Threepwood failed a breathalyzer test from consuming too much egg grog. Realistically, who could *not* like a title that stores your saved games in a sagging bra?
–Tim Royal



I'd hate to see the saw this blade came from

★★★★½

Armed and Delirious
Sirtech Software • www.sirtech.com • Requirements: Windows 95, Pentium, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

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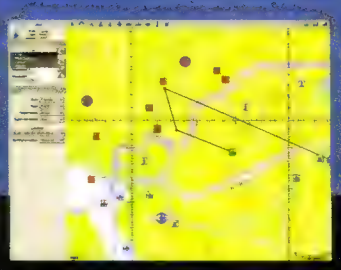
SHOOTING DOWN BOGEYS WAS HARD.

3Dfx screen shot*



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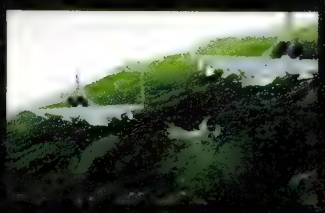

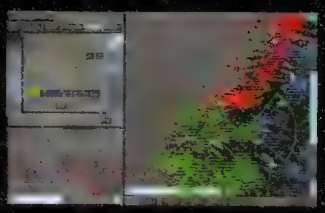

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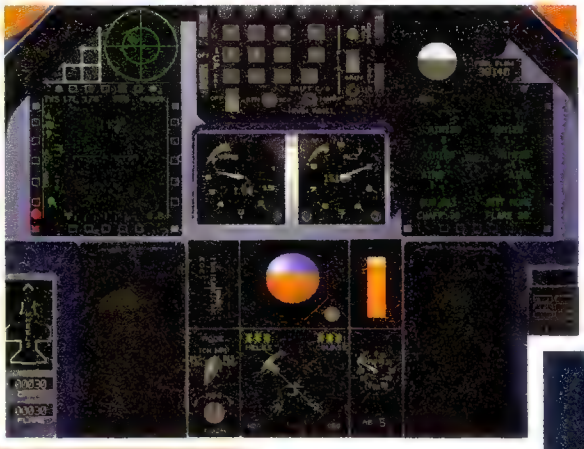
The Hangar

Playability vs. realism – flight school 101 or Top Gun?

Since the advent of PC flight simulations well over a decade and a half ago, the realism versus playability debate has been escalating gradually. In the distant past when flight sims were powered by the early 8086 chipsets, realism was severely limited by the hardware resources available to desktop pilots. With 640k of memory (less the considerable chunk required by the operating system), CGA graphics cards and tinny sound from the internal speaker, it's no wonder most early flight sims were played as graphically and audibly Spartan arcade games. Over the last few years however, incredible advances have been made in the PC hardware field. Faster and more powerful processors, improved motherboard architecture, high-resolution graphics (and the current "hot technology," 3D accelerator cards) etc. confer upon simulation designers the means to model a flight sim with the level of detail and exactitude that they would have only been dreaming about in the late 80s. It's also no exaggeration to say that sim designers are reveling in their newly enhanced medium; from the recent *Back to Baghdad* and *AH-64D Longbow* to the upcoming *Falcon 4* and *Su-27 2.0*, highly realistic and complex titles are continuing to pour onto the market.

This raises the interesting question: How does a gamer, just entering the flight simulator genre, learn how to master and appreciate these games? One readily gets the impression that game designers are mainly catering to the hard-core flight sim pilot, leaving the inexperienced novice to muddle through a string of arcade or medium complexity sims on his own. No realistic simulation exists where a novice pilot is tutored and nurtured through the entire learning process from kicking the tires on the tarmac to his first kill. Some designs have made tentative steps in this direction; *AH-64D Longbow* with tutorial missions complete with voice-overs readily springs to mind, but it can't be denied that the first concern any designer will have is with realism, leaving the learning curve as a secondary issue. So what can designers do to make their ultra complex titles more accessible to the humble gamer?

Probably the easiest overall solution is to make as much of the game as configurable as possible. Take modern aircraft avionics for example. The modern day aircraft is usually replete with a host of HUDs with differing symbology and MFDs with a dozen or so different modes ranging from ground/air radar to damage status. By allowing the player to choose which avionics suites to utilize from mission to mission he can gradually build up his understanding of these systems as his competence with the sim increases.



[clockwise from above]

The detailed instrumentation found in Back to Baghdad

Missile inbound! Now we're in trouble

Back to Baghdad

Simplified flight dynamics can also ease the burden on pilots. Removing some of the energy aspects of flight by allowing "corner velocities" varying from true values, lowering or removing stall speeds and reducing the effects of heavy ordinance upon aircraft angle of attack can all be implemented. This assists new pilots by making their aircraft more responsive to their control inputs.

Artificial Intelligence could also be a configurable quantity but rather than basing it on nebulous decisions made by the design team, quantify the various aspects and allow the player to tailor the AI to his wishes. Pilot reaction values, situational awareness skills, maximum G turns, use of the vertical, reflexes etc. could all be individually modeled in a manner similar to Activision's upcoming *Fighter Squadron*. Similar endeavors could be made with regard to ground based air-defense parameters.

The tutorials in *AH-64D Longbow* provide a solid base for learning how to fly an Apache, but why stop there? Why not take this one step further in modern fighter combat simulations and introduce extensive individual and team training missions to hone a player's skills? As well as basic weapons employment and flight training, have the tutorials show detailed combat tactics such as "bracketing," or "scissoring." Avoiding enemy fire is an aspect of flight sims that many new pilots have trouble handling; there's no reason why missile evasion tactics can't be simulated with an appropriate interactive mission. Finally, landing an aircraft can become second hand with either your "back seater" or disembodied instructor advising you step by step.

And bring back the detailed flight recorder. One cannot doubt that the ACMI flight recorder found in *Falcon 3.0* back in 1992 made de-briefing after a combat mission or training session considerably easier. Indeed, films emphasizing the highs and lows of a fighter pilot's career were regularly traded across the Internet. Use of the flight recorder would make post-training mission evaluations easier to understand, showing where the pilot could improve his performance.

In essence, a sim that allows players to tinker with as much detail and realism as possible is one that will appeal to a wider cross-section of individuals. The novice player will appreciate the sim for its longevity and playability and the developing player will be continually challenged as his skills improve. As for the hard-core sim jockey; all he has to do is crank up all the options to maximum and fly with the speed of heat! *--Phil Thé*

Air Combat Advisor

Part IV: Moving From The BnZ To Make The Kill

As promised, this month we'll finish up the BnZ-to-turning-battle conversion strategy. Last time we left off discussing how being a little selective about which vertical maneuver you use to slow down and place yourself in a more advantageous attack position can yield additional advantages.

Gettin' too high

As you no doubt are aware of by now, if you've been following the *Air Combat Advisor* for any amount of time, your energy (E) state is always a major factor of consideration for which maneuver is best for any given situation. Vertical maneuvers such as the vertical Immelman are good choices if your E state is pretty good, but it can actually work against you if you have a lot of E. To help illustrate why, let's go back to the basic concept behind this tactic.

Pilots commonly believe that the idea behind vertical plane turning is to put some distance between yourself and the bandit. Although going vertical will achieve that goal and correspondingly reduce the ability of the bandit to shoot you, what you're really after is a vertical angle advantage – or more specifically, an angle disadvantage for the bandit where the bandit can't shoot at you. This is exactly why these vertical maneuvers are classified as turning maneuvers rather than vertical Zooms (the former one depends on angles and the latter on distance).

The problem comes if you put too much distance between yourself and the bandit (specifically well beyond gun range); while it will decrease the bandit's ability to shoot you, this actually reduces the disparity of E states that we're trying to gain. Ideally you want to shoot at the bandit when his E is lowest, so every second that you delay your attack when you have this advantage (delays that excessive separation distances will increase), the more time the bandit will have to recover E. If you allow this to happen, what you're likely to find yourself facing is a head-to-head vertical pass rather than the more desirable head-to-tail shot.

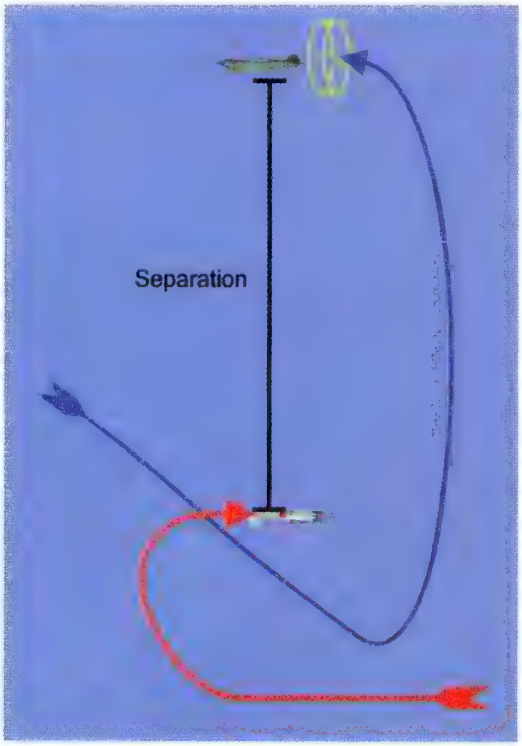
Getting back to our situation, if you use a vertical Immelman when you have a lot of E, you'll end up increasing your separation because you're merely trading airspeed for altitude (more altitude means more separation distance). A better choice for this situation is a maneuver known by some as a Vertical 8, or double Immelman. What ever you call it, basically it's an Immelman followed by another Immelman (hence the moniker).

What happens is that rather than just trading airspeed for altitude, you further bleed E by turning vertically in the half loop portions of the maneuver. This is because every time you move the nose of the airplane (more specifically change your angle of attack or yaw – which is really very similar to AOA but on the airplane's vertical axis, so the drag penalty is lower due to the relative effect of gravity and size of the vertical stabilizer) it costs you E. (Conversely, note that the half rolls, or rolls in general for that matter, won't significantly alter your E state to any great extent.)

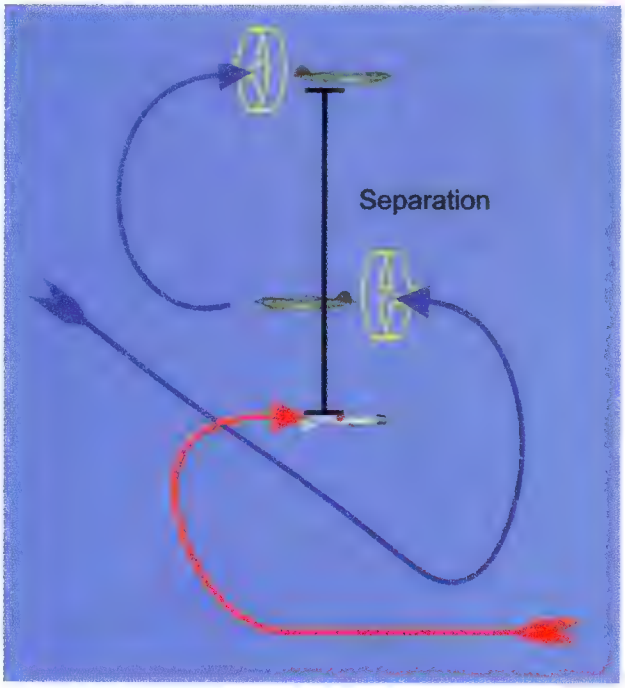
Although the main advantage to this maneuver is it allows you to bleed E and reduce your separation compared to a more basic vertical maneuver, it also has one additional benefit that you may want to be aware of. By reversing direction twice, you end up flying more or less in the original heading you began your attack at. This can help keep the enemy off balance if the bandit believes that you're going to fly straight over.

Pulling back hard on the stick for the vertical section of a maneuver will help you bleed E, but depending on the realism and flight model setting of your sim, you may need to watch for other pitfalls. Blacking out from g forces, ripping the wings off your airplane (structural failure), or getting into an accelerated stall (where your *climb* resembles a descent more than a climb) are all signs that you've pulled too hard. Finally, time your pull up to end up as close to directly above the bandit as possible.

Until next time – overconfidence can be just as deadly as a 20mm cannon shell. *–Ben Chiu*



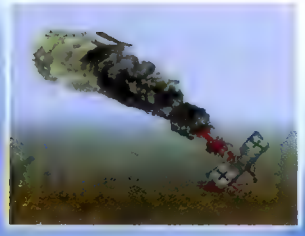
▶ Using a vertical Immelman (or other highly vertical maneuver) when you have a lot of E will increase separation because you're merely trading airspeed for altitude, and more altitude means more separation distance



▼ The Vertical 8 or double Immelman allows you to bleed more E when you turn vertically in the half loop portions of the maneuver because every time you move the nose of the airplane it costs you E . One additional benefit is that by reversing direction twice, you end up flying more or less in your original heading

BLOW THE OPPOSITION OUT OF THE SKY.

WE HAVE.



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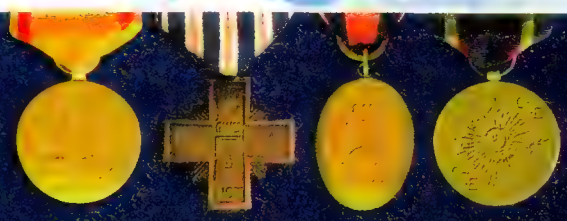

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FALC

PERFECTION IS NEVER RUSHED

IT ACTUALLY TRAVELS AT ABOUT MACH 2
COMING SOON

Armored Fist 2

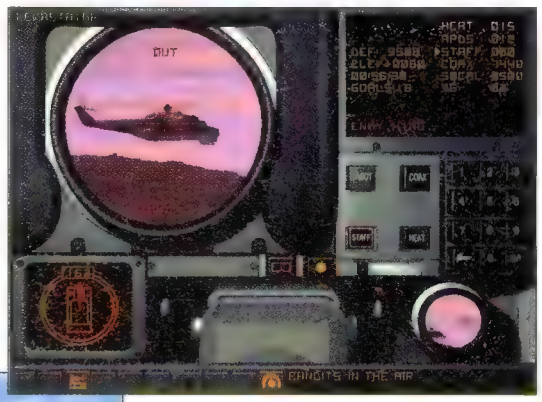
Gimme that ol' yeehaw fun-factor

Despite some occasionally mixed PR and marketing signals from NovaLogic, you can't really come down on them for not producing a hard-core tank simulation. From ads that proclaim "the ultimate off-road vehicle" to a box whose only use of the term realistic comes in describing the visual appearance of the vehicles, you shouldn't expect *Armored Fist 2* to provide an ultra-realistic tank simulation. If you're looking for an *iM1-A2* with better graphics, stop reading right now – this game provides the graphics, but realism takes second place to gameplay fun. If, however, you're looking for a game that sits somewhere in the range of action-sim to mid-range sim, then read on; depending where on that part of the "realism" scale you're looking to play, *Armored Fist 2* will either be close-but-no-cigar or a whole lot of fun.

The first *Armored Fist*, which used the original Voxel Space engine, was rightly criticized for its graphic look – the engine, which was developed for the helicopter sim *Comanche*, looked blocky and clunky when viewed up close. With *Armored Fist 2* and Voxel Space 2, these problems are largely eliminated, and the graphics overall are extremely good looking. To those more familiar with the planar look of polygonal terrain engines (even those with textures on them), the fractalized appearance of Voxel Space 2 may take a bit getting used to, but they still look better than anything yet on the market (the nearest competition is at least four months off). The vehicle graphics are particularly strong, although some of the explosion effects are disappointing (shoot fuel trucks and they turn into a blackened hulks… maybe they're all empty?). While good looking, NovaLogic doesn't always pay close attention to the theatres they modeled; for example, you'll encounter saguaro cacti in an Iran that looks suspiciously like the U.S.'s southwestern desert, and are those Joshua trees in Belarus? Even better than the graphics are the sounds – the radio and crew communications in particular are outstanding, and add a lot to the game's atmosphere (in addition to sometimes conveying information).

The game has two modes of operation, what they mis-term Easy and Realistic – mis-termed because Easy can, at times, be quite challenging, and because Realistic is only "realistic" within the structure of the game (call them instead "Standard" and "Advanced" and you'd be closer to the truth).

Realistic mode is closer to the middle range of simulation realism – while it is more involved than Easy mode, many corners have been cut. For example, the MPAT and STAFF rounds have been merged into just the STAFF round, the terrain heights have been exaggerated wildly (it's nearly impossible to set up a decent "hull down" position as what would have been a six-foot rise in reality is now a very steep, 60 foot ridge line), and the tank still performs wonders that real M1 tankers can only dream of (have you ever seen a multi-ton tank crawling along the face of a mesa?). Still, it comes close to providing a pretty good feel of operating a tank platoon from the commander's perspective (something even the hard-core games have failed at)… or it would if it weren't for a couple of serious flaws.



[top to bottom]

Trying to take out an enemy Hind from the gunner's position

This commander will be lucky if he can bag the fleet Frogfoot using just his machine gun

Forming up for a mission at your base; sometimes things like cammo nets go "clang" when you run into them

First, when you, as the commander, use the CITV (commander's independent thermal viewer) to search for and designate targets, the game often doesn't choose the target you are trying to designate. Sometimes it chooses a nearby target, sometimes it chooses something 90 degrees off the direction you're looking in. Apparently NovaLogic changed the designation routines in the game at the last minute; if things worked like described in the manual, this mode of gameplay would not only be more fun, it would also be more realistic (although with the mission design, wherein you can be outnumbered 10 to 1 or worse, maybe this just wouldn't work). Almost as bad are the actions of the AI driver; when you designate a target, he snaps the tank hull to face in the direction of the target, then moves it back to the direction of the next waypoint… taking the turret and CITV views with him. This means you have to rotate the CITV back to that group of targets each time you fire, a deadly habit in the high-threat environments the game puts you in. If NovaLogic were to fix these points, this mode would be a blast, as much of the rest of it is done right (maybe not realistic, but "right" from a fun gaming standpoint).

The game is best at its Easy mode of play, where realism is almost completely out the window. Note the "almost"– it doesn't descend into pure arcade mode (no powerups, no unlimited ammo, etc), but instead keeps some factors of realism

(ammo runs out, there are reload times to consider, etc.) mixed in with the action. And there is plenty of action – it's quite a rush to send your tank barreling across the landscape, with you constantly hitting the autolock button in hopes of getting in the first shot in an engagement. Sure, it's not at all realistic, but it has a great yeehaw factor.

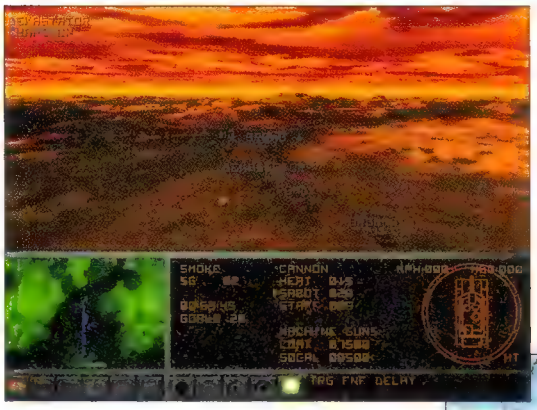
Despite the element of fun, this mode still has some problems, primarily in the form of the scenarios. The box says 50 scenarios, but this must include multiplayer ones as there are only 42 solo, apparently pre-scripted missions (including the training missions). While grouped into "campaigns," these are really independent missions –there's no carry over from one to the other, and they can be played in any order. While some of the missions are easy, some are quite difficult, but this difficulty comes more from overwhelming you with opponents than it does from outthinking you. Rarely can you use realistic tank tactics to win (especially in escort missions, where the vulnerable convoys – not under your control – often charge out into the most ludicrously dangerous situations); instead you have to figure out the puzzle of the mission. This can sometimes be fun but is more often just frustrating as you play missions over and over again. Still, this difficulty is necessary to extend gameplay; once you've completed the missions, that's it– there is neither a mission builder nor a random mission generator.

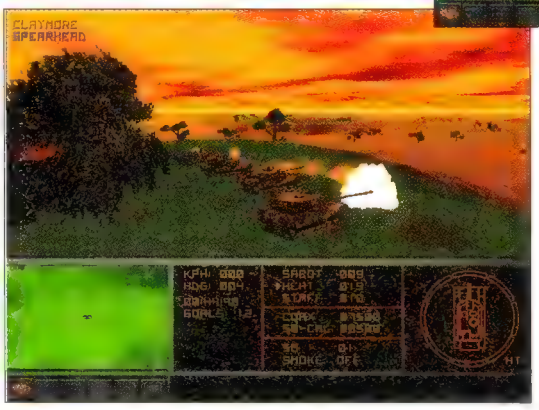
Multiplayer provides three different modes: deathmatch, cooperative (against the computer), and red team vs. blue team. Deathmatch is just that: give each player an Abrams with 40 sabot rounds and see how many of the others each can shoot within a given time period. Head-to-head deathmatch is fairly dull – two players on a large map means you spend all your time driving around looking for the other player and constantly clicking on the "designate target" button. Because the terrain is so exaggerated in the vertical dimension, it's hard to set up ambushes, so you have to hope you get the first shot in, or that you can maneuver quickly if that first shot fails. Cooperative missions feel a lot like single player missions except that now others can control those extra platoons. Red team vs. blue team matchups, wherein humans control opposing platoons, provide the third multiplay option.

Difficulty doesn't come from smart computer opponents but from lots of them and from crafty mission designs. The AI (either of your opponents or your own vehicles not under your direct control) is weak to non-existant; it seems computer controlled vehicles often don't "wake up" until after you cross certain invisible boundaries. This means maneuver around the flanks often puts you in a position where you can happily shoot away with abandon with little threat to yourself. Once you cross one of those trigger areas, however, watch out. You'll find yourself swarmed with enemies and in quite a firefight; it's times like these where offensive missions are at their most frantic. Of course, if you're in a defensive mission, things really get hectic as you're rarely given time to take up a solid defensive position before the enemy hits you.

Performance is generally decent; on a 133MHz Pentium with all the options turned on the game sometimes runs slowly in Windows 95, but runs much better in DOS mode. One scenario (Peacekeeper in the Secure Peace "campaign") suffered mysterious slow-downs on two different 133s (the frame rate dropped to one frame per several *seconds*, while the action continued unabated), leaving the mission unplayable on those systems, but when checked on a 266MHz Pentium II, the mission ran just fine.

Generally fun from a "yeehaw!" perspective, *Armored Fist 2* is kept from "being all it could be" by some questionable design decisions. If you agree with those decisions, then this is a game for you, but other gamers looking for a beginning to mid-range sim may want to pass; if you're a hard-core sim fan this means you didn't listen at the start of this review and read through anyway, but the recommendation remains the same: pass on this one. *–Scott Udell*





[top to bottom]

Easy mode is best played from the exterior views. Here a mid-range shot shows your entire squad formed up in an echelon-right formation to protect the convoy strung out behind it

Defensive missions are often the hardest as they usually require you to be right where the mission designer can concentrate the enemy forces

Because of exaggerated terrain heights you can rarely achieve true hull-down positions

If not for problems playing from the commander's position the "realistic" mode, while not really realistic, could be a lot of fun

★★★☆☆

Armored Fist 2

Novalogic • www.novalogic.com • Requirements: DOS, 120MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet via Kali, LAN, modem, serial

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iF-16

Flying a bit too close to the ground

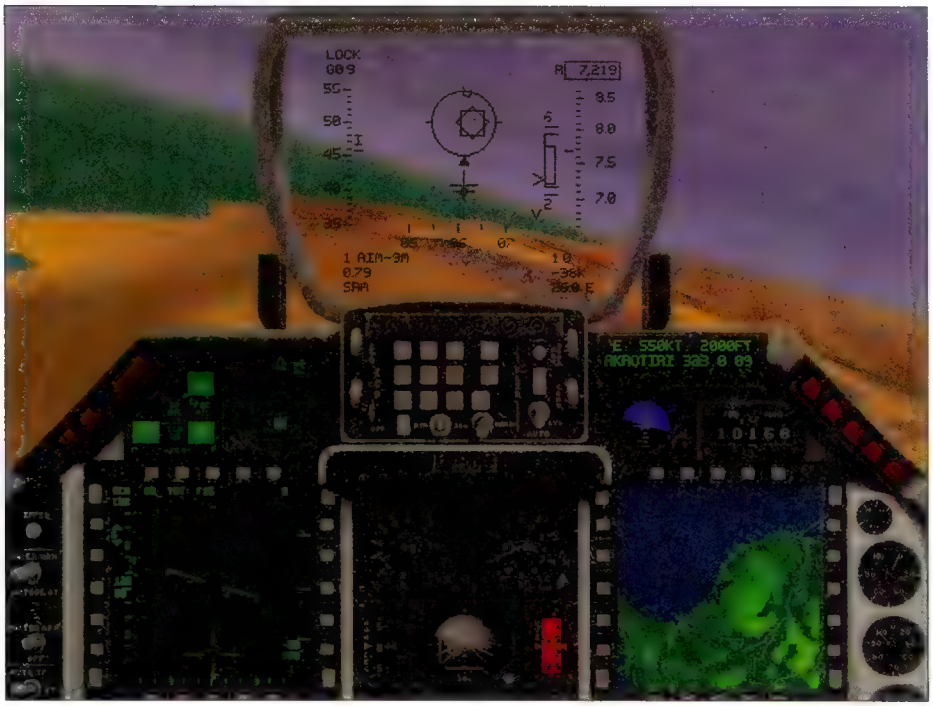
iF-16... "the definitive simulation of the F-16 Fighting Falcon." At first glance, the caption might imbue the reader with visions of a highly detailed physics model with six degrees of freedom, a dozen highly complex heads-up and multi-function display modes, sophisticated avionics systems and a plethora of accurately modeled weapons. Unfortunately, Interactive Magic's latest title dispels that impression from the moment the box is opened. *iF-16* manifests itself as a medium-complexity simulation aimed squarely at a nebulous middle ground where it fails to satisfy either the hard-core sim jockey or the rookie pilot fresh out of flight school.

The game comes with both DOS and Windows 95 versions; alas only one screen resolution (640x480) is supported and with the detail set to maximum, the frame-rate can only be described as "coarse." With some serious hardware however, the graphics look very appealing, with gouraud-shaded terrain and detailed polygonal units. A planned 3Dfx patch should improve game performance; by the time you read this article it should be available for download.

Gamers who routinely ignore the late-breaking "README" files are encouraged to change their habits; the file here is a comprehensive document that lists many additional features added late in the design stage. Indeed, the size of the document gives rise to the feeling that the final production stages of this sim were rushed. The rather sparse flight manual and tutorial booklet, both of which are replete with contradictory commands and erroneous keyboard mappings, reinforce this opinion. There are also a few interface bugs (such as the non-functioning Restore button in the mission planner); a patch to address these problems is on the way.

The twenty or so training missions may be well thought-out exercises but lack the final polish necessary to ease a new pilot into the sim. Missions that start with the aircraft already airborne with initial throttle settings too low to sustain level flight and F-15 Eagle's taxing across your flight path as you take off are just a couple of the events that make new pilot conversions a perilous undertaking for the inexperienced. The actual combat missions (thirty of them set in the three theatres provided: Cyprus, Israel and Korea) are diverse and definitely challenging, although the bogie count in air-to-air missions can reach astronomical levels at times. Wingman commands are also limited to four basic orders. While "attack my target" and "follow me" may be sufficient to get you in and out of a furball, they aren't conducive to planning offensive

Either an ex-pilot with no "situational awareness" was re-trained as a Tower Controller ... or 15 feet separation at take off is SOP at Nellis!



The aspect angle, range and closure with this Turkish F-16 are probably close to perfect! The pK for this Sidewinder is probably in the high 90s

fighter tactics like "bracketing" or "dragging" – unlike what is seen in many other sims on the market.

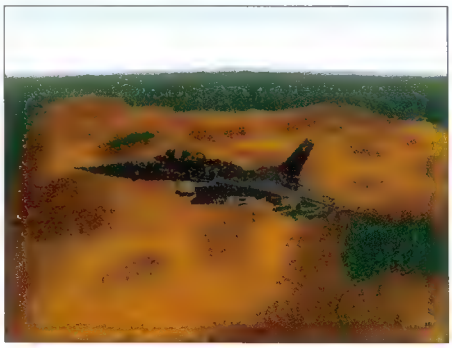
Once in the air, the minimal number of views available doesn't help a pilot maintain "situational awareness." The ultimate oversight is the lack of an inherent "over-the-shoulder" view; the README file instructs pilots to toggle to an outside view and then pan the view around to "check six." The "padlock" or "headlock" view displays useful heads-up display (HUD) symbology on screen but lacks complete upper hemisphere tracking even though the F-16's bubble canopy gives the pilot a near 360° view. It doesn't bode well for the sim either when the padlock view is mentioned in the readme file rather than the actual manual.

The weapons and avionics have also been "trimmed back" with only the four primary radar modes for air and ground detection modeled. This does make the learning curve less steep for new pilots but leaves the more experienced pilots feeling a bit cheated.

The physics of the plane are actually quite good. The increased angle of attack needed when taking off and flying with extra ordinance, the granularity of the stick when changing pitch and rolling, the energy bleed-off during high-G turns, etc. – all feel right (although *Back to Baghdad* purists might disagree regarding the corner velocity of the aircraft).

Overall, *iF-16* lacks a lot of the sparkle that Digital Integration (the designers) showed off with their initial *Apache* release. In many respects *iF-16* is to *Back to Baghdad* what *Apache* is to *AH-64D Longbow*; it's a mid-level complexity title that's aimed at tempering the nuances of the simulated aircraft into a more manageable simulation for pilots. Unfortunately, during the transition from design to final product, a lot of what would have made the game a classic just didn't make the grade. If you're just cutting your teeth on flight sims, try one of the NovaLogic titles as a primer. If you're a Sierra-Hotel veteran who just can't wait until *Falcon 4.0* hits the shelves… wait. *–Phil Thé*

[*After Phil finished his review, I-Magic released a patch upgrading* iF-16 *to version 1.2; the patch adds a "check-six" view and improves performance somewhat. - Ed.*]



Taking out a barracks with GBU-16s; the other flight elements are softening up the runway further to the south

★★★☆☆

iF-16

Interactive Magic • www.imagicgames.com • Requirements: DOS, Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16Mb RAM, 4X CD ROM • Multiplayer: 2-16 players, LAN, modem, serial

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SportsWire

The eternal struggle – realism vs. entertainment

Welcome sports fans to the re-birth of the *SportsWire* column here in the pages of *Computer Games Sports Plus*. Long-time readers will remember our old sports columns being a mix of reviews and op-ed stuff, but now we're going to respect the magazine's format of keeping the columns separate from the reviews. So here we go with sports topic number one – realism vs. entertainment.

Is it possible for sports games to be both accurate simulations of their sport and also be "fun" to a mass-market that may or may not actually be interested in the subtleties of the game? Do most sports gamers want to spend four hours locked in a 1-1 pitchers' duel or would they rather play 10-minute quarters in a football game and win 55-49?

[top to bottom]

You may see a lot of touchdown catches like this one in Madden 98

Past versions of Front Page Sports Football could be tricked with the mighty "death sweep"

Some people may enjoy the incredibly high scoring in a game like Legends 98

The thing sports game fans tend to lose sight of is that sports games are the most mainstream products the PC has to offer. They're socially acceptable (businessmen will admit to owning *Links* but not *Doom*) and they're not in the least-bit abstract to people familiar with the sport (try to explain *Command & Conquer* to your grandpa). They also cost a small fortune to produce – the licenses of the properties (teams and logos) and players associations (the players) combined can eat away 25% of your potential revenue from a game, so companies can't afford to be too risky.

However, the key thing to remember is that, as a mainstream product, they have to appeal to people's *perception* of what a sport is like. There may never be 100 shots on goal in an NHL game, but many people who watch an occasional game on TV probably think there're that many. And there are a helluva lot more of those people than hardcore sports fans (sad, but true).

The battle between realism vs. entertainment is usually targeted directly at the big cheese of the sports market, EA Sports. They spend a fortune advertising their games on TV (and on network TV during sports events, not at 3:19AM during reruns of *Gilligan's Island* on the *Unemployed Channel*) and their games look better than everyone else's. People naturally expect the gameplay to match their expectations – unfortunately, everyone can't quite agree on what exactly those expectations are (see the *NHL 98* review on page 156).

There's little question that EA's games are fun– for most people. However, they and every other sports-producing company still fall short with most hardcore sports fans. We don't just want fun sports – we want realistic sports. We want four hour baseball games. We want 98-94 overtime NBA games. We want 10-7 football scores. Or at least we want that to be an *option*.

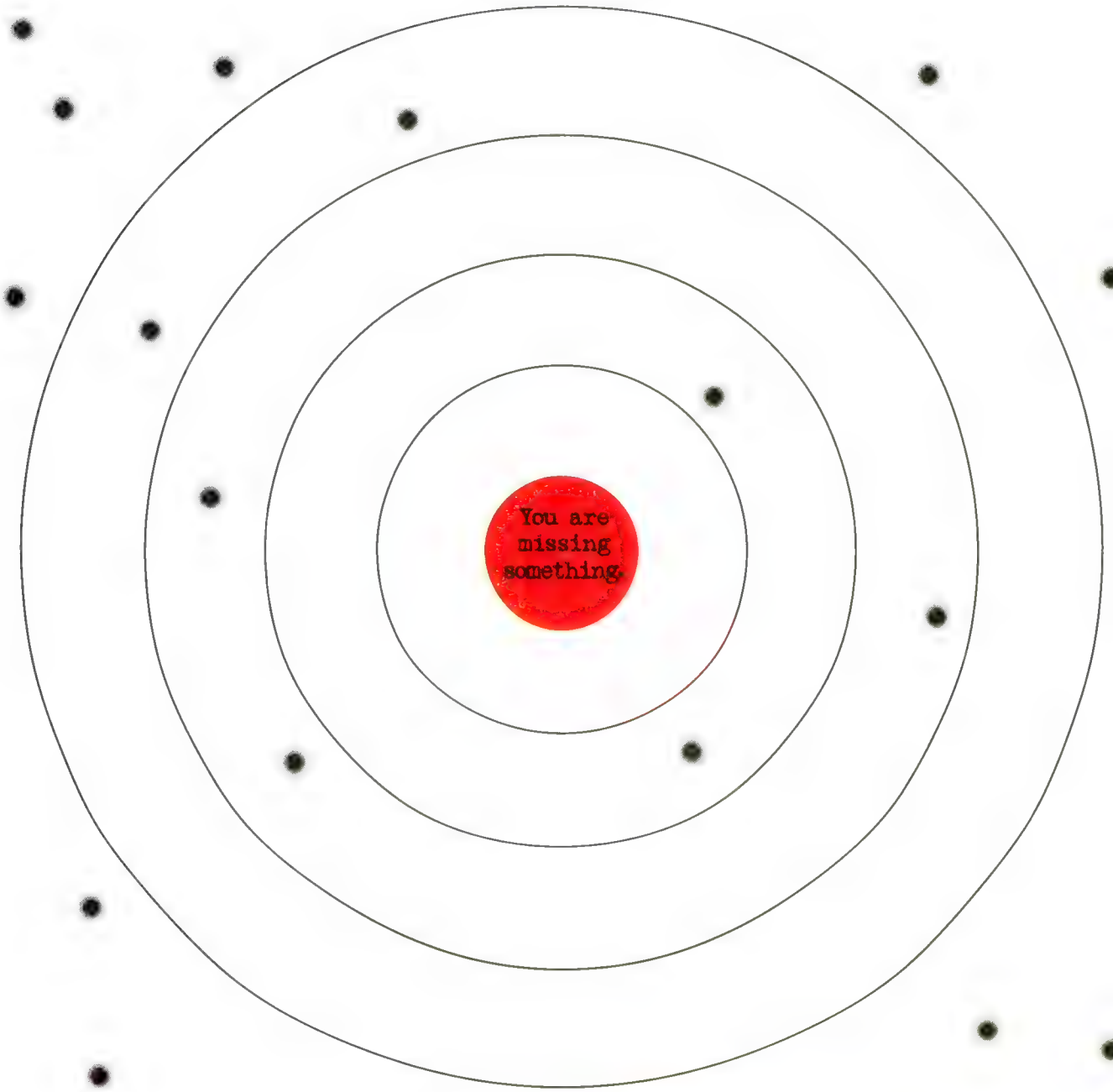
But it seems most sports games can't give us that option. Released too late for review this issue, I played my second full game of *Madden NFL 98* and won a game on "All-Madden" difficulty 86-28. I was playing the Raiders against the Falcons, which is not exactly a fair match-up, and Jeff George managed to throw nine touchdown passes to James Jett. All in the fourth quarter. All by running the exact same play. If you read the review of *Legends Football 98* in the December issue [*CGS+ 85, page 221*], you'd know this isn't a unique problem.

However, this is where realism, or lack thereof, kills the entertainment factor of a game. Most football games have suffered from "killer play" syndrome – I remember a sweep that would score a TD on every play in *Joe Montana Football*, and I designed my own "Death Sweep" in *Front Page Sports Football Pro 95* that would guarantee over 100 yards rushing per game.

Most casual sports fans probably never discover these flaws. Or maybe they don't care, because frankly, throwing nine TD passes in one quarter was a helluva lot of fun. But what're we hardcore sports fans to do? Lower our expectations?

Nah. The future will probably be much like the present. You'll keep multiple games for multiple purposes. Want to run up some points? Play *Madden*. Want to simulate a few seasons? Go for *Front Page Sports Football*. Want to run up some points while simulating multiple seasons? Er… maybe next year's models will finally offer that feature….

–Steve Bauman



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NHL 98

Beauty and the Beast

Which would you prefer: a girlfriend or wife who was absolutely gorgeous, but had the brains of a rock, or an average looking lady who could discuss everything from politics to sports? A movie with tremendous awe inspiring special effects and a water-thin plot, or a movie with standard settings and a great story?

Which would you prefer: a game with graphics and sound that stop people in their tracks, but relatively poor AI, or a game that is boring to look at but has excellent AI?

The answers to these questions vary for different people, but for *NHL 98*, perhaps more than any other game in recent memory, your answer will determine whether you think this game is a major masterpiece or one of the biggest disasters in the history of sports games.

Let's start with the good: the features that everyone will agree EA Sports got right. The game's presentation, the graphics and sounds, are arguably the best ever seen in a sports game, and perhaps as impressive as in any game of any type. If you have a 3Dfx video card (the only 3D accelerator supported), this may be *the* game you use to show off your card. Each arena in the NHL is lovingly recreated; for example, as the last strains of the national anthem are being sung at the start of each game, one sees the scoreboard, retired jerseys and championship banners hanging from the rafters. The game starts with commentary from the two announcers; as each goalie is shown adjusting his mask and anxiously banging the ice with his stick, a TV style overlay displaying their current stats. The announcers' commentary is appropriate to the stats for the goalies, as it is throughout the game. In fact, the announcers are done extremely well, throwing out comments and statistics during the game and playing off of each other, adding to the feeling of watching a television broadcast.

The rest of the graphics in the game are equally top rate. The player animations are generally excellent, with little touches such as the players checking their sticks and wiping their brows during breaks. One feature that can be a bit, well, *weird*, is the players' faces: each player has a copy of that player's real-life face glued onto the polygonal body. While this generally works pretty well, there can be strange artifacts of the process, e.g. darker-toned faces pasted onto a lighter-colored neck. Other graphics are top notch, from the crowd to the aforementioned arena details to the very legible signs on the boards. During game breaks, a player will be shown in close-up mode with a graphic overlay, TV-style, displaying some type of statistic about the player and accompanied by a discussion of said player by the announcers.

[top to bottom]

Rinks such as Joe Louis Arena are very well reproduced

Each game starts by displaying goalie stats

Television style facts about various players are displayed throughout the game

A great deal of attention has been paid to the sounds in *NHL 98*; the crowds chant and cheer appropriately, without the feeling that one is listening to a taped loop. The crowd can be heard to chant for their home team, using the actual team name, the organ will play songs which often differ from arena to arena, and EA has even licensed and included some familiar pop songs that are commonly played at sports events. All of this is presented in surround sound and results in a feeling of not so much watching an NHL game on television as much as actually being in the arena. Folks, when it comes to eye and ear candy, it just doesn't get any better than this.

Ah, but what about the actual hockey game? There *is* a hockey game included, right? Well, that's not as easy a question to answer as one might think.

First, everything about *NHL 98* would lead you to think that this is intended to be a simulation of NHL hockey. Let's take a look at the box: updated NHL team rosters and player ratings; NHLPA and NHL licenses, allowing inclusion of real players and teams and team logos; coaching strategies; a statement calling *NHL 98* "the most realistic…..hockey game ever made"; "Stanley Cup® proven intelligence from Colorado Avalanche coach Marc Crawford"; everything here screams "authentic simulation of NHL hockey."

Wrong.

If what you're looking for is an accurate simulation of NHL hockey, look elsewhere. *NHL 98* fails miserably as a hockey simulator. First, the game plays much too fast. Real

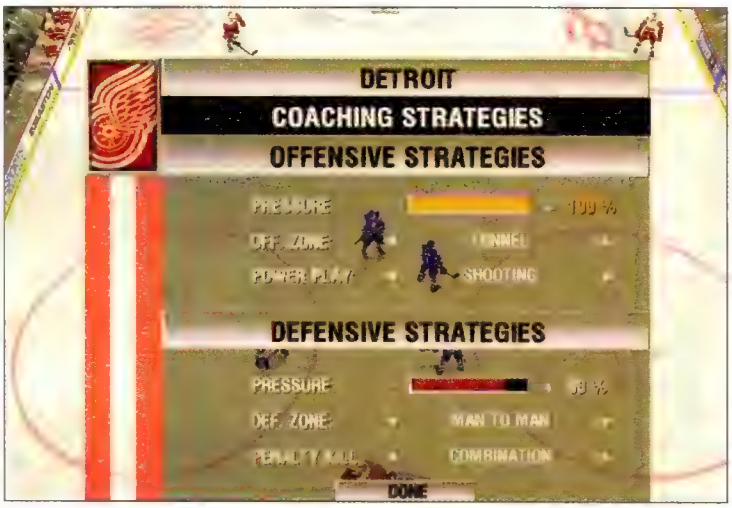
NHL hockey is a very fast, very fluid game, but if you are playing *NHL 98* and tune into an NHL game on television, the players on the real ice will appear to be skating through syrup. The animated characters in *NHL 98* skate around at a frantic pace, zooming from one end of the ice to the other at speeds that Federov and Gretzky can only dream of. Players will watch a pass go by without a thought of reaching their stick out to grab it, and heaven forbid that they should ever move backwards to grab a loose puck or pass. On powerplays, players position themselves well in front of the goal; however, they will never move to get open when covered – they are quite content to stand still while completely blanketed by a defensive player. Likewise, the computer can be a bit puzzling on defense at times, e.g., passively watching a dump come through their zone while you whiz by them to pick it up. In general, the AI just doesn't play like real hockey.

There are numerous other reasons that *NHL 98* is a poor simulation of real hockey, but the one that demands special attention is the way the game handles shooting, scoring and the goalie AI. In the NHL, teams average somewhere around 20 - 30 shots a game, a game consisting of three twenty minute periods, and it is not unusual for a team to occasionally have no shots on goal in a period. In *NHL 98*, using ten minute periods (versus the real life 20 minute periods), it is very common for the human player to have 60-80 shots on goal per game. This is very demonstrative of the difference in how this game plays vs. a true hockey simulation; the shots on goal are a reflection of the style of the game.

And this is also reflective of a very fundamental flaw in the game, namely how goals are scored (and not scored). If one discounts the occasional claimed AI hole which allows for easy goals (which, quite frankly, are difficult to reproduce consistently), a hockey simulation should reward good passing, play setup, and waiting for the good shot. This is why NHL players don't blindly shoot the puck at the goal every time they touch it, and why the shot at goal numbers are relatively low in real hockey games. In *NHL 98*, straightforward shots on goal, for example a streaking player coming down the middle and hit with a pass from the wing, have almost no chance of going in (everything here refers to Pro and All-Star mode; Rookie mode is a scoring fest). Literally hundreds of times, a player will work for a good shot from an open player, patiently planning and passing, only to have that shot from the perfect scoring position bounce off of the brick wall that is the computer goalie. Goals are almost exclusively scored on rebounds and quick one-timers. There's nothing wrong with those types of shots going in, but they should not account for all of the goals in the game. After seeing perfect set-up after perfect set-up being rejected, the player eventually realizes that the only way to score is to select a "flood the goal" strategy, shoot like crazy, and wait for the rebounds to go in. It just isn't real hockey.

If it's not a simulation; how enjoyable is *NHL98* as an arcade game? It depends on what you're interested in. If you don't care about the lack of similarity to real hockey, and graphics and sound are paramount to your gaming experience, *NHL 98* may be exactly what you're looking for. The gaming environment, the sights and sounds and overall game presentation, are incredible. If this is what you're looking for, you would be best advised to turn the difficulty down to Rookie (to get around the "super-goalie" frustration mentioned earlier), which will result in more arcade-like 11 - 9 scoring extravaganzas.

If you are looking for a hockey sim, this will be a one star game for you. If you are looking for an arcade game with stunning sights and sounds, and it doesn't matter to you that the gameplay has very little semblance to real hockey, this could be a five star game for you. Take the average of the two, and there's your final rating. *–Jeff Lackey*



[top to bottom]

While several offensive strategies are available, only a select few will produce goals

The Replay mode is quite well done, with a plethora of options

Good luck scoring a straight-in shot on the computer super-goalies!

★★★☆☆

NHL 98

EA Sports • www.easports.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB of RAM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem

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Monday Night Football '98

ABC tries hard but comes up with FPS: Football Lite

Forget playing on astroturf – should they have to play in blue rain, too?

Warning bells chime when we are faced with a product like *Monday Night Football '98*. First of all, it's a licensed product, others of which are often mere shells of the original entities. Secondly, the first *Monday Night Football* was a failure, with poor performance, controls and visuals. With these marks against it, it's hard not to dive in with some trepidation, expecting the worst. And while the game is far from being the worst football game on the market, it still misses the mark.

This first impression you get from the game is that a lot of thought went into it. Almost everything is customizable, from the joystick settings to the players themselves to a well-designed playbook. The players are fully realized, and editing them is a snap. Different positions are given different skills – for instance, quarterbacks are not only rated for pass accuracy and arm strength, but also for the pass release (the time taken to throw the ball) and rolling-out skills (both left *and* right are rated separately). Running backs and wide receivers are not only rated at rushing and receiving, but also the ability to run after initial contact. The team management screens are also well done, and you can assign players to different positions by utilizing a depth chart.

There are also gameplay features that are hard-to-find in the competition. Quarterbacks can be hit just as they release the ball, and will occasionally improvise on a broken play. Each team has its own playbook full of custom plays; and there is a coaching profile that allows you to edit the team's tendencies in an easy fashion–make one team more likely to adopt a run-and-shoot, another to grind it out on the ground, and so forth. Both of these features go a long way toward giving you the feeling of each team being a separate and distinct entity.

A weak area of most sports games, the play-by-play shines in *Monday Night Football 98*. The commentary from Al Michaels is succinct and accurate, and Dan Dierdorf will occasionally chime in on an interesting play like an excited schoolboy, but his comments are never inappropriate. It's wise to leave the announcer option on, since Michaels will occasionally slip in a useful observation, like the occasional remark on a player's ability in a situation or lack thereof.

The Giants find themselves in a familiar position – the opposition marching across midfield

During games, players perform to their real abilities, and the stats reflect that, even in QuickPlay simulated games. One exception – running backs still seem to churn out only two yards a carry; and while the best are able to manage 4.5-5 yards a carry, it's usually due to an occasional 30-40 yard run. That said, the stats are within the bounds of reason.

Unfortunately, the gameplay itself is the worst in many a moon. On a 133MHz Pentium,

★★½☆☆

Monday Night Football '98
ABC Interactive • www.abcinteractive.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 100MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, modem, null modem

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Metropolis Digital

KIDS TO ADULTS
K-A
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ESRB

Note the game times – one Sunday night, and, of course, one Monday night

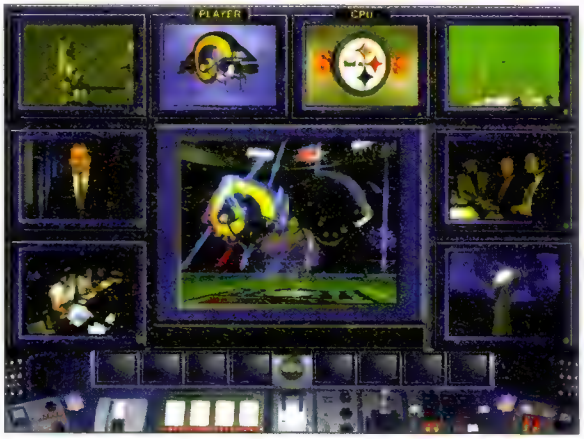
the game's frame rate is painfully lethargic, even with all graphic options turned off, and on a faster machine the play is only minutely better. The player animation is poor, appearing as if each player has just five frames of animation. The sound effects, while sometimes clever (the home crowd will start chanting "dee-fense" when the opposition has short yardage), are unspectacular.

Even worse, the controls are frustratingly sluggish. On offense, the play will often be so jerky that the players will actually jump from spot to spot. However, the game does allow you to select the play and let the computer players execute it (which they do capably), but you may choose to take over at any time. (An odd quirk makes the four and six-button joystick configurations lack the action/hike ball button, which the user must program himself.)

QuickPlay games will be very familiar to the original *Front Page Sports: Football* owners. Simulation takes a *very* long time – about 30-45 minutes to simulate one week, which adds up to over nine hours per regular season. Also, when you simulate a week, you cannot interrupt it and come back without completely sacrificing the simulation. There is no career option, and perhaps this is the fatal flaw of the game. Without this possibly redeeming feature, it's impossible to overlook the major gameplay flaws.

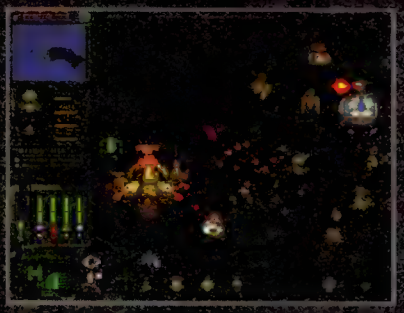
It seems that the creators of this game were more focused on the multimedia aspects of this game. It is made by a television network division and it shows; much of the game is made to resemble a football broadcast. For example, the main screen is dazzling. Moving the mouse over different parts of the screen animates little films, some of which are highlights associated with the teams selected to play. Little statistical touches also abound, like drive analysis screens (which show all of the game's drives, even on simulated games). There are statistic "flashes" that pop up now and then ("Troy Aikman in this game - 1 TD, 1 INT"); and the now-omnipresent "game box" continues to show the score, time, and situation just like a real televised game.

While there are small, shining touches, the basic gameplay and engine seem to have been neglected to make this a prettier product, rather than a hardier one. It is analogous to a Fabergé eggshell surrounding a lead center. Nonetheless, *Monday Night Football '98* is an improvement over the original game, and if future endeavors give us more intuitive and fluid action on the field, a real *Front Page Sports* killer could be on our hands. *–Jonah Falcon*

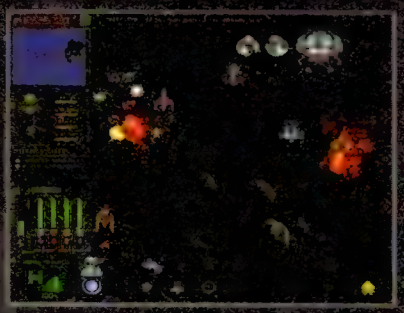


A gorgeous menu screen greets the player

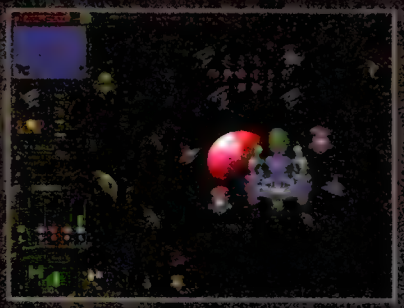
STAR COMMAND DELUXE



Improved graphics mean brighter explosions, greener terrains, bloodier war.



Hardcore, multi-player, Windows 95 action. Fight it out over the Internet, free.



Build alliances with alien races, learn their technologies, then annihilate them. Ouch.

MicroTech

Metropolis Digital

Available 11/97. Impatient? Download the demo @ www.metro3d.com

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Worldwide Soccer

More console sports action for your PC

Worldwide Soccer is a PC port of Sega's popular Saturn console game, a hybrid that attempts to be an accessible, easy to play game with enough options to make things interesting. Playing options include a range of modes, from Exhibition to World Cup tournaments. The tournament modes are implemented well and working through qualifiers to the World Cup tourney can be entertaining. The players are all fictional; Sega has, however, included an editor that allows you easily to change players' names. A variety of stadiums are available, and weather actually makes a difference: in rain, you can see the ball being slowed down by the soggy pitch. Also, *Worldwide Soccer* offers a surprisingly large number of strategic options on both offense and defense.

Rain significantly affects the gameplay

A wide variety of offensive schemes are available

The graphics are adequate; player animations are fairly well done, with injured players clutching their knees and ball handlers stumbling when challenged hard (although the players all look identical). Game control, using a gamepad, is excellent, with all buttons utilized and configurable. The game's ebb and flow feels like real soccer, passing and shooting are solid, and (with one glaring exception) your teammates seem to play with a modicum of intelligence. So, what's not to like?

Unfortunately *Worldwide Soccer* has a few flaws that, depending upon what you are looking for in a PC soccer game, may be either minor irritants or fatal flaws. The crowd noise is an *extremely* repetitive loop, and the commentator has a limited range of phrases, which are often inaccurate. However, the most serious flaw is surprising, considering the game's generally fine AI: the goalies are often amazingly stupid. The goalie will go all the way to the top of the penalty box on a corner kick, leaving the opposition with simple shots into an undefended goal. The keeper will stop an easy lob into the box with his chest, then stand immobile beside the ball while an opposing striker takes it and scores the easy goal. Very frustrating.

Overall *Worldwide Soccer* is an entertaining soccer game that plays remarkably like real soccer; if they fixed the goalie AI, this one could be a winner. *–Jeff Lackey*

★★★☆☆

Worldwide Soccer
Sega Sports • www.sega.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB of RAM, 2X CDROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, modem

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ALIENS™ ONLINE
MULTIPLAYER BATTLETECH™
LEGENDS OF KESMAI™
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The War of the Chipsets II

Some new contenders vie for 3Dfx's title of best 3D accelerator

It started off as a battle between competing 3D accelerator chipsets from 3Dfx and Rendition. That battle was won by 3Dfx and gamers crowned it "King of the 3D Chipsets" in spite of its higher-cost and requirement for a separate 2D card to function. The last year has seen an evolution from multiple Rendition cards on the market to multiple 3Dfx cards, and the latest batch add features like 2D acceleration and TV outputs.

However, there are some new challengers ready to take the crown from 3Dfx. The time's right for round two of the chipset wars, so we've accumulated a few of the new 3Dfx cards and some of the challengers. In the coming months, we'll look at new offerings from Matrox, ATI and NEC as well.

All of the tests were conducted on the same machine, a 266MHz Pentium II with 64MB of RAM. As a control, the machine was tested with a Matrox Millennium II and an Orchid Righteous 3D (a 3Dfx Voodoo card). Its 3D WinMark scores are 53 for the Matrox and 191 for the Righteous.

The testing consisted of installing each card, running benchmarks on them, installing and running the bundled software, and then running a Direct3D game, Red Orb's *Take No Prisoners*, and monitoring its FRAMERATE command with and without 3D acceleration at 640x480. As a control, the Righteous 3D gave 30FPS accelerated, the Matrox 20FPS accelerated and 16FPS unaccelerated.

One observation: after spending a week installing and testing cards, let's just say Plug and Play does work from time to time. All of the cards installed and ran perfectly during testing.

Jaton Blaze 3D

A low-cost card based on a Trident 3D chip, the Blaze 3D isn't much of a 3D accelerator card. It turned in the lowest 3D scores, but performed adequately in the DirectDraw tests.

In our informal *Take No Prisoners* test, the card turned into a 3D decelerator. It managed a measly 10FPS, and its lack of support for transparencies caused graphic glitches. Running it without acceleration enable produced 16FPS, a competitive figure.

The Blaze 3D can't be recommended as a gaming card. Its respectable 2D performance makes it a decent choice for a non-gamer's machine.

Intense 3D Voodoo

Cards based on the 3Dfx Voodoo Rush chipset (which combines 2D and 3D) have received a lot of bad ink due to problems with drivers and a perceived performance gap with the regular 3Dfx cards (which require a 2D card). Our testing illustrated that gap. All of the benchmarks showed the Rush to be about 10% slower than the other 3Dfx cards. *Take No Prisoners* managed 24FPS in Direct3D mode, which doesn't compare well with the other cards' 30FPS. It managed 16FPS without acceleration enabled.

The software bundle, though, is fantastic, with the Direct3D version of *Moto Racer*, a 3Dfx version of *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* and best of all, a 3Dfx version of *AH-64D Longbow*. Unfortunately, 10% is 10%. If you can live with that deficiency, the Intense 3D is an excellent card.

Maxi Graphics Gamer 3D

From France's Guillemot International, the Maxi Graphics Gamer 3D is functionally identical to the first-generation 3Dfx-based cards such as the Diamond Monster 3D and the Righteous 3D. Its performance was identical to that of the Pure 3D and the Righteous 3D.

It ships with full versions of UbiSoft's *POD* and *Sub Culture*, both high-quality games that show off the power of the accelerator. Priced competitively with other 3Dfx cards, it's definitely worth a look.

Blaze 3D	Intense 3D Voodoo	Maxi Graphics Gamer 3D	Pure 3D	Velocity 128
Manufacturer **Jaton**	Manufacturer **Intergraph**	Manufacturer **Guillemot**	Manufacturer **Canopus**	Manufacturer **STB**
2D Chipset **Trident 3D Image 9750**	2D Chipset **Alliance AT25**	2D Chipset **N/A**	2D Chipset **N/A**	2D Chipset **nVidia Riva 128**
3D Chipset **Trident 3D Image 9750**	3D Chipset **3Dfx Voodoo Rush**	3D Chipset **3Dfx Voodoo**	3D Chipset **3Dfx Voodoo**	3D Chipset **nVidia Riva 128**
Memory **4MB**	Memory **6MB**	Memory **4MB**	Memory **6MB**	Memory **4MB**
Bundled Games **Daytona USA, Virtua Fighter**	Bundled Games **AH-64D Longbow, Moto Racer, Turok**	Bundled Games **POD, Sub Culture**	Bundled Games **None**	Bundled Games **Interstate '76, Moto Racer, FIFA 97**
Price **$99**	Price **$229**	Price **$199**	Price **$179**	Price **$229**

Pure 3D

The drivers Canopus included with their Pure 3D card caused 3D WinBench and *Take No Prisoners* to crash. Restoring the generic 3Dfx drivers supplied with DirectX 5.0 solved the problem. Once up and running, *Take No Prisoners* generated the usual 3Dfx 30FPS.

The Pure 3D is the first 6MB 3Dfx card, with 4MB of texture RAM instead of the usual 2MB. While it performed identically to other 3Dfx cards with most benchmarks and software, using a "large 4MB scene" in 3D WinBench showed an enormous gain over the regular 3Dfx cards (the Pure 3D managed 26FPS to the others' 8FPS). The extra RAM may eventually make it the fastest card on the market, but most software is written with the 2MB limitation of every other 3D card in mind.

A bare-bones card, the Pure 3D ships with no software bundle and passes the savings on to the consumer, which makes it an excellent buy for the hardcore gamer.

Velocity 128

Powered by the nVidia Riva 128 chipset, the STB Velocity 128 is the fastest 2D/3D accelerator currently on the market. It blasted through all of the tests, posting the fastest 3D WinMark score and bettering all of the other 2D cards in many of the DirectDraw tests. In the real-world, it proved to be a superb performer as well, with *Take No Prisoners* generating 31FPS accelerated and 17FPS unaccelerated. It's the most complete 2D/3D package currently available, and the only card on the market that can be recommended over a 3Dfx-based card.

For Direct3D games, at least. The software bundled with the card nicely illustrates its only problem – where's the native software? Of the three games that ship with the card, one supports Direct3D (*Moto Racer*) and the other two aren't even 3D accelerated (*FIFA 97* and *Interstate '76*, though there is a D3D patch for the latter).

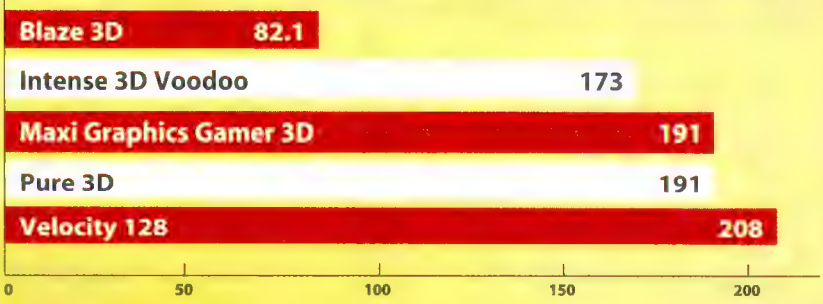
OpenGL support is promised for the future, which may make the card compatible with games like *Quake* and *Hexen II*, but until that happens, the Velocity 128 remains the best Direct3D, but not the best 3D card, on the market.

The final word

If you're in the market for a 3Dfx card, shop price and bundle. It's tough to recommend one over the other based purely on performance, though the Pure 3D may have more "legs" than the others, assuming games will start requiring 4MB of texture RAM.

The Velocity 128 presents an interesting problem. It's fast, but its 10% speed boost isn't that impressive when you consider the nVidia chipset has come to market well over a year after the 3Dfx. If the future's Direct3D, the Velocity is a superb buy. If the future's OpenGL, we'll have to see. For the present, it gets our "Stamp of Approval" for being the best 2D/3D card combo on the market. *–Steve Bauman*

3D WinMark



2D DirectDraw Performance

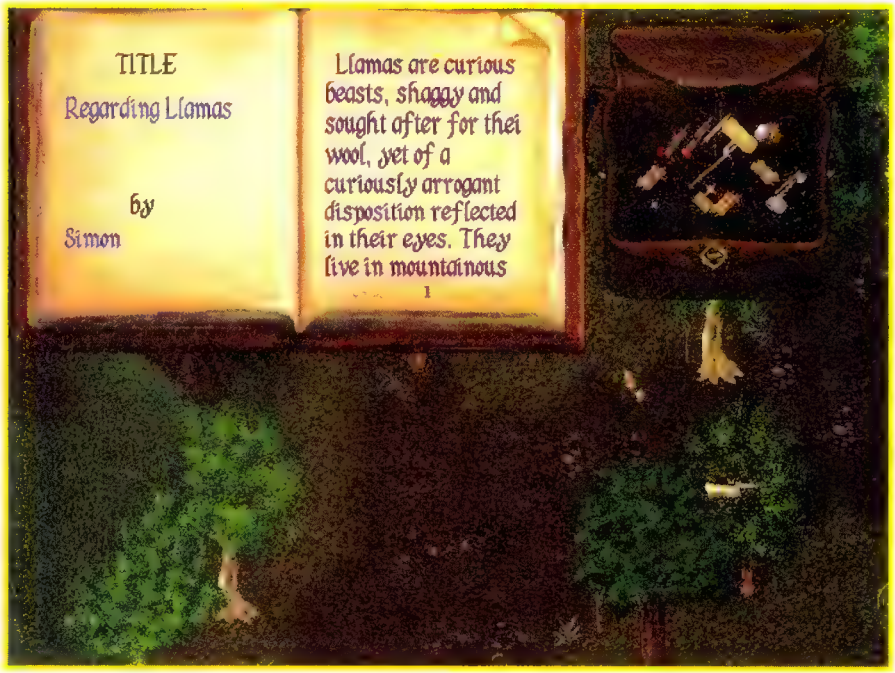
Test	Blaze	Intense	Velocity
Animate Screen Size, 640x480	153	172	242
Animate Screen Size, 800x600	146	168	238
Animate Screen Size, 1024x768	142	161	237
Animate Color Depth, 8 bit	153	172	241
Animate Color Depth, 16 bit	115	83.3	196
Animate BltFast	153	172	241
Animate Blt	151	172	241
Animate Solid	144	172	261
Animate Transparent	159	172	260
Animate Full Screen	95.7	66.4	165
Animate Windowed	84.3	64.8	27.5
Animate Clipped	85.9	67.5	27.9
Animate Memory, video/video	153	172	241
Source in system, Work area in video	75.3	99.2	39.5
Source in video, Work area in system	115	130	77.4
Source in system, Work area in system	116	131	77.3
Animate BLT size, 256 pixels	32.8	71.6	53.9
Animate BLT size, 1024 pixels	76.3	124	119
Animate BLT size, 4096 pixels	153	172	241
Animate Stretch, Solid, 2.0x, 8 bit	10.8	14.9	43.4
Animate Stretch, Solid, 1.7x, 8 bit	3.53	3.83	37
Animate Stretch, Transparent, 1.7x, 8 bit	3.76	3.88	36.5
Animate Stretch, Solid, 1.7x, 16 bit	2.97	3.29	72.3
Fill Color Depth, 8 bit color	15.9	514	1320
Fill Color Depth, 16 bit color	343	253	691

Numbers represent million pixels/sec. Higher numbers mean better performance.

The performance tests were conducted using Ziff-Davis® 3D WinBench 97® Version 1.0 and WinBench 97® Version 1.1 on an IMS Extreme with a 266MHz Pentium II MMX CPU, 512K RAM cache, 64MB EDO RAM, 4.3 GB EIDE hard drive with 256K cache running Windows 95 OSR2 with a FAT32 file system. All drivers were current as of 10/28/97. The tests were performed without independent verification by Ziff-Davis and Ziff-Davis makes no representations or warranties as to the result of the test.

Ultima Online: The debate begins...

[*Editor's note: The* Ultima Online *review appeared on our web site a few weeks before this issue went to press.*]


TITLE
Regarding Llamas
by
Simon
Llamas are curious beasts, shaggy and sought after for thei wool, yet of a curiously arrogant disposition reflected in their eyes. They live in mountainous
1

I feel Robert Mayer's review of *Ultima Online* [*pg. 66*] is a little harsh. I've been playing it for about three weeks now and consider it the best role-playing game, if not the best game, ever. He criticizes the depth of the game, which is exactly what most of the players enjoy. None of us want to be able to jump into a game and be the "Grand Master" immediately and be able to kill anything in sight. What's the fun of that–you may as well keep playing *Duke Nukem*.

Finally a game has come along that forces you to use your brain and not just brawn to play effectively. A smart player can as effectively debunk a formidable monster as well as a strong player. The idea of making one work up to a status is much more rewarding than being able to type in some cheat codes when you get stuck or want to go on a senseless rampage for wealth and fame.

Ultima Online allows players to go and do things that were never thought possible a year ago, and its never-ending. It's a new game every time you log on, with the potential to expand the game, add new quests, creatures, or to make parts more difficult or easier. Players write stories of there adventures that keep you enthralled like any novel you have ever read, you only need to go to www.uovault.com to see the enthusiasm players experience.

New cities, new dungeons, monsters, skills, and weapons are just the tip of the iceberg that Origin can modify delete or add to a never ending fantasy world. Sure, Origin has their headaches that probably won't be eased for some time to come, but for those who are tired of the same old adventure and the game dictating what you can or cannot do, *Ultima Online* is a breath of fresh air in the entire gaming community, and I applaud Origin for their determination of "pushing the envelope" and being far ahead of other companies with their vision. I for one hope it never ends–instead having to shell out another $50.00 for a new game that will find its way to the shelf after completed, I'm getting a new game every month for $9.95. See you on the battlefield.

Xozone
Novice Warrior, Atlantic Server

I have never bothered to reply to any inane article I have found on the web, but your article "reviewing" *Ultima Online* was nothing short of the worst analysis I have ever seen. To begin with, did Mr. Mayer bother to spend more than 10 minutes playing before coming to his short-sighted, far from accurate comments?

This is a multi-user RPG, with all the limitations inherent in the genre. Of course there are technical issues to deal with, and of course there are some problems with lag, but I run on a 28.8 modem, and I have never had enough lag that the game could be considered unplayable. In fact, it's usually smooth as silk.

Now, to address some of his complaints:

"I can tell who an NPC is."

Anyone with half a brain can tell the difference between a real person and a machine. However, can you tell me any other game where you can ask, "Hi. I'm looking for my friend, Sasami. Where is she?" and get a response like, "Sasami is in the tailor shop" ? If Mr. Mayer expected to be unable to distinguish a computer from a player, then I firmly believe he does not have the mental capacity to rank as a reviewer worthy of his salt. [*You may want to refer back to the previews where Origin's Richard "Lord British" Garriot admitted being fooled by their superb NPCs.–ed*]

Anyone with half a brain can tell the difference between a real person and a machine.

"The economy doesn't work."

It seems your major complaint is that "Shopkeepers are always broke." Well, what are you trying to sell them? It seems to me that if Mr. Mayer expects every shopkeeper to buy whatever he throws at them, then Mr. Mayer should step into the real world of supply and demand. I am almost always able to sell to shopkeepers by checking their inventory and discovering what it is they need. And, of course, out of the way places are easier to sell to, and more profitable. Simply speaking, it is a *real* economy, designed for multiple players, not tailored to Mr. Mayer's every little whim. When playing with other people, you have to learn to share, Mr. Mayer. Kindergarten, remember?

"This is a game that expects players to focus most of their energies for the first few (real-time) weeks in the game on making a living, buying and selling the same products over and over and over, just to accumulate enough gold to begin to have fun."

Wasn't your last complaint about the economy? Excuse me, but I've played a tailor, an animal tamer, and a bow maker. I loved going out "to work" so that I could buy that magic halberd or better platemail. Dungeons are just what they are supposed to be–hard. So it makes sense that you should be able to earn money using other skills. One of my favorite characters simply fishes for a living and delivers things to other characters.

"This is a game that, as the crowning glory of a vigorous training regimen, advocates going off into the woods and… killing rabbits."

Apparently, Mr. Mayer never played any of the other multiplayer games out there (*Meridian 59*, or any of the spurious MUDs

available.) A player always starts out being weak. What's the point if you can kill a dragon on the first day? Where is the advancement there? The sense of accomplishment? Please...

In conclusion, I feel that this is an unbearable disgrace to your magazine, and ask that you print a retraction, at least until your reviewers become either competent or at least willing to take a look at the system for more than an hour. After all, I started playing a month ago, and now at least 15 of my friends (even the non-computer ones) are playing. Apparently the public does not agree with Mr. Mayer's assessment of the situation.

Hil Hughes
Zerius Computer Industries

I find it hard to believe that a game that has taken so much of my time and all of my friend's time would receive such a negative review. I participated in the Beta and was frustrated at times, but overall had a good time. Playing the public release, I have been having a grand time. Server stability isn't perfect yet, but it is adequate.

The economy needs work. The biggest problem is it is too easy to make or acquire things that can be sold to NPCs. Who in the world realistically can make 100 bows in one day? The amount of items needs to be toned down (less loot on monsters, less items able to be manufactured in one day) and there actually needs to be a reason for one player to make items (i.e. other players need the item for example). This works nicely for smiths and tailors, but what about the other professions? It's hard to make a living as a baker, etc.

Which brings me to my next point. Who cares if the game expects you to make a living by doing "mundane" things like training? This is an on-line world, not a fragfest. There is no "kill the foozle" or get all the items "win" condition. So, why is an instantaneous ramp up to god-like character status required for a game to be fun? If a player comes into *Ultima Online* with the mentality that they want to be killing dragons and building a castle the first week of playing, they are playing the wrong game. This game should be reviewed on it's own merits. It does not compare to *Diablo* or *Quake*. The goals and gameplay are unrelated. A new babe in the woods character will get his ass kicked unless he trains. Use some common sense and give your character good combat skills so he can go out and fight if that is what you want to do. Buy whatever skills you need later on. Skill points are a measly 10gp per point with about 30-35 points max trainable if you can find the right NPC.

Another "problem": characters can't be moved from server to server. Who cares? If the reviewer had been paying attention to the storyline, the different servers represent different shards of reality. No one ever gave the idea that a character could be moved from one server to another. Friends on another server? Make a character on that server. Do you get to take your *Quake* guy with all of his ammo and weapons to another server? No. [*Nor do you build-up or have any personal attachment to your* Quake *guy –ed.*]

The main idea of the review is where I disagree the most. The review gives the impression that the game is not a good value and is not fun. Both points are wrong. $10 is nothing to anyone I know. Most people I know spend more than that in one night drinking beer. The others spend far more on coffee, movies, etc. Be realistic. *Ultima Online* is a game for interacting with other people. If you can role-play, it will be fun. If you can't, stay out of the game and break out your Atari 2600 for some real game "value". The game while not perfect merits more than two stars.

Shawn Alley
Via Internet

I must take exception to many of the things stated as "truth" in your *Ultima Online* review. If you had written your review as an opinion, great. But many of your opinions were instead stated as fact. Please be more careful to state this in the future.

Now, I am one of the *Ultima Online* players, and not only spent my money for the *Charter Edition* but purchased multiple copies of it. I play it about 20 hours per week, and enjoy every minute. It is *not Diablo* or *Quake*. That is the very first thing that needs to be addressed. If someone expects *Ultima Online* to be like either game, they should run not walk back to the store they purchased it from and return the game.

Why shouldn't I want to do something more than kill? Your own arguments about the economy were contradictory. I want to buy and sell items. It should not be as easy as make an item, sell it, get money. I want supply and demand. There are plenty of opportunities to talk with fellow players.

And let me make this very clear; *I like the floating text*! I hate playing online games that use the *Meridian 59* interface. About the time the third person says something, you have to go to the scrollback log to see what was said; not in *Ultima Online*. I can see it on the game screen, and if the text is covered by other text I can place the mouse cursor on the underlying text and it comes to the foreground. The other game companies can learn a lot on how to improve *their* interfaces by studying *Ultima Online*.

In conclusion, *Ultima Online* is not for everyone. And like you pointed out several times, it is an evolving world. However, I believe you have done a severe injustice with your so-called review. Hopefully you will be more objective in the future.

La Vern R. Ogden
Via Internet

A review is *an opinion, backed up by the reputation of the reviewer and the publication–see this month's editorial for more about reviews and ratings. –ed*

I find it hard to believe someone that reviews a game that is still in development, and is very far from being finished. Every other computer game reviewer, be they magazine or website, has had constructive criticism of *Ultima Online* as to what the game should be *when it's finished*!

Scott Wade
Via Internet

If we followed this policy, no game, online or not, that planned future "enhancements" (which could also be referred to as bug fixes and patches) could ever be reviewed because they'd always be a "work-in-progress." As with all games, we review the version of the game you can go to the store and purchase. As soon as Origin released a boxed copy and started charging people to play Ultima Online, *it became reviewable.–ed*

I just wanted to applaud *CGS+* for the review of *Ultima Online*–it is scathing, harsh, and brutally honest, which is what has been sorely lacking in other reviews I've read so far, further proving why I think this magazine is probably the best computer magazine out there.

Snowlock
Via Internet

I *loved* the *Ultima Online* review. Finally someone with some balls takes it out on that game. Nothing but truths there guys... very nice. I feel the exact same way about it.

Dalamar
Via Internet

I just want to say that I gave up on game magazines a long time ago due to what I perceived to be "padded" review scores.

However, I kept hearing good things about your publication and purchased the October issue (*Tomb Raider 2* cover). The contents of that issue combined with your *Ultima Online* review is enough to make me invest $20 bucks in your magazine for a year subscription.

Douglas Rener
Via Internet

we crave feedback

Send all correspondence to editor@cdmag.com

Letters may be edited for space considerations.

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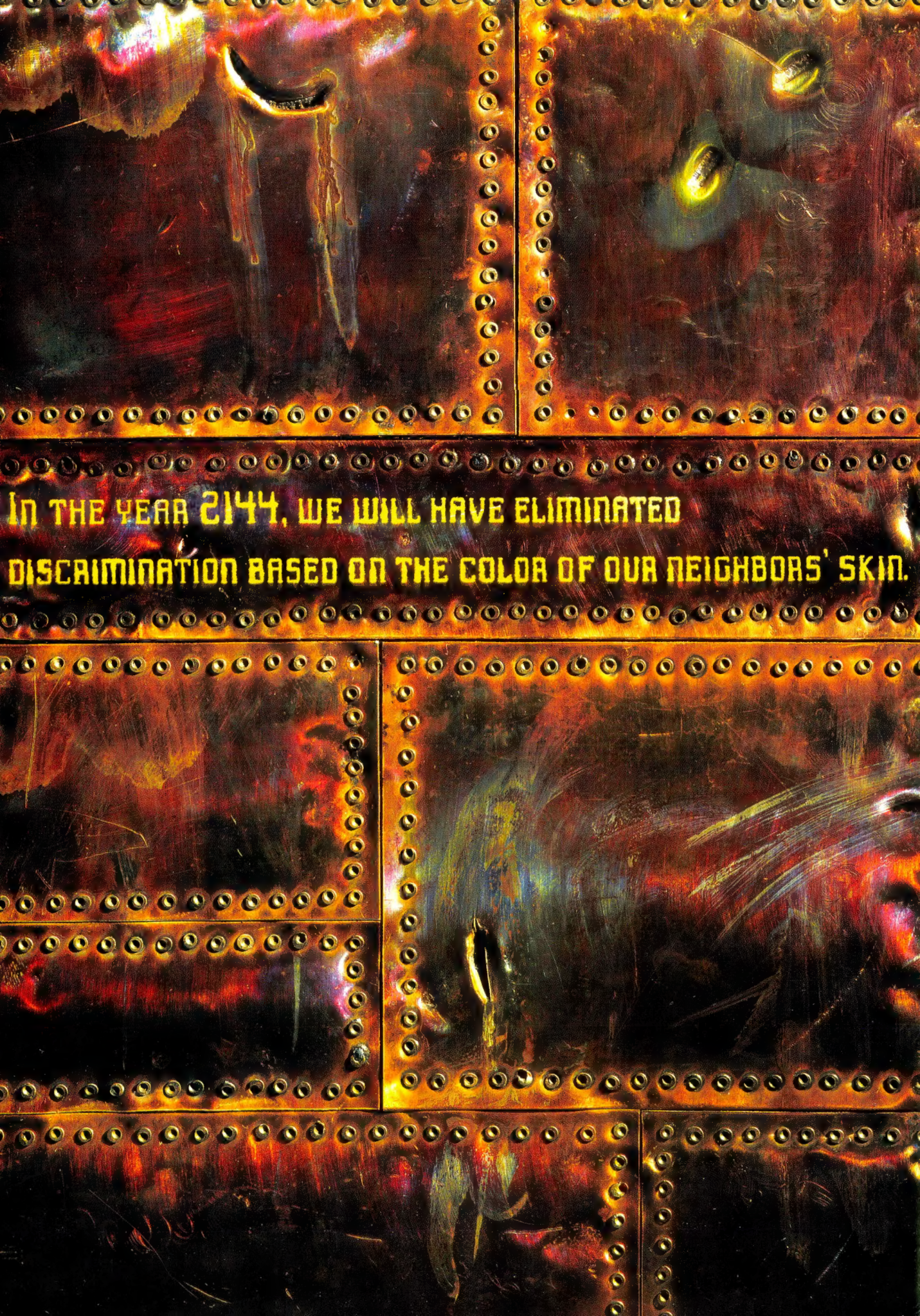
DOMINION
STORM OVER GIFT 3


IN THE YEAR 2144, WE WILL HAVE ELIMINATED
DISCRIMINATION BASED ON THE COLOR OF OUR NEIGHBORS' SKIN.

DARKENS:
- Savage aliens
- slow & stocky
- overly armored
- pack lots of firepower!

MERCS:
- half human-half alien
- 100% ruthless
- take no prisoners
- play by their own rules

INSTEAD, WE'LL BASE OUR HATRED ON THE NUMBER OF OCULAR CAVITIES, METHOD OF LOCOMOTION, AND WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAVE AN EXTERNAL OR INTERNAL BREATHING APPARATUS.

SCORPS:
- predatory aliens
- operate scorpion-like vehicles
- known for attacking in swarms!

HUMANS:
- die-hard galactic soldiers
- highly adaptable
- Weakness= they bleed easily

A TODD PORTER GAME

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Come in Midway...Midway come in.

I... I've never seen anything like it.

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Computer Gaming World

This looks set to blow all other space games away.
PC Gamer

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Computer Gaming World

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TEEN T AGES 13+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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